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JOHN DONNE'S HOLY SONNETS:

PROBLEMS OF ORDERING AND INTERPRETATION

by

JAMES M. YOUNG



A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH  
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend  
to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance,  
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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of ..... Arts .....



## Abstract

The ordering of Donne's Holy Sonnets has always been a problem. The early manuscripts and editions do not provide sufficient evidence that Donne intended any specific ordering. Modern editors follow one of two orderings: either that suggested by Sir Herbert Grierson in his 1912 edition of Donne's poetical works, or that suggested by Dame Helen Gardner in her 1952 edition of Donne's divine poems. Both editors base their orderings on a study of the manuscripts and early editions. Grierson, finding no definite significance in any ordering, adopts the ordering of the 1635 edition for his first sixteen sonnets, and adds at the end three sonnets found only in the Westmoreland manuscript. Dame Helen divides the sonnets into three groups, two of which, she argues, are sequentially arranged.

Dame Helen offers two major arguments for her reordering of the sonnets. The first is that a number of the sonnets are sequentially arranged according to subject matter. The second is that the same sonnets are sequentially arranged according to a principle of order derived from Ignatian meditative practices. A close examination of Dame Helen's arguments and the sonnets themselves shows that her ordering of the sonnets is unsatisfactory. The sequential arrangement according to subject matter depends on an extremely fragmentary reading of the sonnets, while the identification of various sonnets with the specific parts of a meditation results in a distortion of the meaning of each sonnet. Furthermore, the systematized and precise method of meditation set down by St. Ignatius has to be so distorted





in its deployment over Dame Helen's sequences that it cannot legitimately be called a principle of order.

Grierson takes his ordering of the first sixteen sonnets from the edition of 1635. These sonnets form a loosely-tied group that falls into two parts distinguished by theme and tone. Grierson's ordering encourages a close critical analysis of the individual sonnets, rather than a preoccupation with finding connections between sonnets. While Dame Helen's ordering encourages this preoccupation, it discourages a close analysis of the differences between sonnets in the same sequence. With Grierson's ordering we are in the best position to evaluate both similarities and differences. Furthermore, by printing all nineteen sonnets as a single group, Grierson encourages a consideration of the Westmoreland sonnets in the context of the other Holy Sonnets. To say the sonnets are "separate ejaculations," as Grierson does, is not to say they are nineteen unrelated poems. His ordering most fully illuminates each sonnet by making clear the extent of its relationship with other sonnets, while allowing each sonnet to be judged on the basis of its own merits. Grierson's ordering is conducive to a critical reading of the Holy Sonnets, and, since the attempts to discern Donne's intentions with regard to their ordering have failed, it is, therefore, the ordering that ought to be retained.



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## Chapter I

### The Ordering of the Holy Sonnets in the Manuscripts and Early Editions and in the Modern Editions

The ordering of Donne's Holy Sonnets has always been a problem. Fourteen extant manuscripts from the seventeenth century preserve four alternative arrangements of differing numbers of the sonnets, and of the seven seventeenth-century editions of Donne's poems, the first, published in 1633, two years after the poet's death, differs from the subsequent six editions in both the number of sonnets it contains and the arrangement of the sonnets it has in common with the later editions. The question is whether any of the available orderings are of special significance, either in preserving Donne's intended ordering or, if Donne's intentions are indeterminable, in preserving the sonnets in the order that most fully illuminates each sonnet by making clear the extent of its relationship with the other sonnets, while at the same time allowing each sonnet to be judged on the basis of its own merits. Twentieth-century editions of Donne's poetry follow one of two orderings: either that ordering suggested by Sir Herbert Grierson in his 1912 edition of Donne's poetical works, or that suggested by Dame Helen Gardner in her 1952 edition of Donne's divine poems.<sup>1</sup> Which of the two orderings is preferable?

A brief description of the various orderings of the sonnets as they appear in the early texts is necessary for understanding the rationale of the two modern orderings, since both editors base their



orderings on an intensive study of the early editions and available manuscripts. For this purpose, the manuscripts may be divided into four categories according to the four different arrangements of differing numbers of the sonnets. We ought, of course, to remember that determining the relationships between the various early manuscripts and editions and assessing their relative authority are complex tasks, involving other considerations besides the ordering of the poems. The four categories delineated here are concerned only with distinctions of ordering, and do not necessarily represent independent manuscript traditions. Since Grierson and Dame Helen number the sonnets differently in their editions, I shall identify them neutrally by quoting the first line of each.

In the first manuscript category there are eight manuscripts, each containing twelve sonnets appearing in the following order:

As due by many titles I resign  
 Oh my black soul: now thou art summoned  
 This is my play's last scene, here heavens appoint  
 At the round earth's imagined corners, blow  
 If poisonous minerals, and if that tree,  
 Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
 \*Spit in my face ye Jews, and pierce my side,  
 \*Why are we by all creatures waited on?  
 \*What if this present were the world's last night?  
 \*Batter my heart, three-personed God; for, you  
 Wilt thou love God, as he thee? then digest,  
 Father, part of his double interest<sup>2</sup>

There are three manuscripts in the second category. Each of these manuscripts contains twelve sonnets, eight of which are found in the



manuscripts of the first category:

\*Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?  
 As due by many titles I resign  
 \*O might those sighs and tears return again  
 Father, part of his double interest  
 Oh my black soul! now thou art summoned  
 This is my play's last scene, here heavens appoint  
 \*I am a little world made cunningly  
 At the round earth's imagined corners, blow  
 If poisonous minerals, and if that tree,  
 \*If faithful souls be alike glorified  
 Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
 Wilt thou love God, as he thee? then digest,

The four asterisks in each group indicate the four sonnets not found in the other group. There are two manuscripts in the third category. They repeat the ordering of the twelve sonnets of the second category, and add, under the separate heading, "Other Meditations," the four remaining sonnets found in the manuscripts of the first category. The Westmoreland manuscript, in a fourth category by itself, contains the sixteen sonnets of the third category, similarly ordered, and three sonnets not found elsewhere--"Since she whom I loved hath paid her last debt," "Show me dear Christ, thy spouse, so bright and clear," and "Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one." All nineteen sonnets appear as a single group. Since the last three sonnets do not appear in the early editions of Donne's poetry, it may be assumed that the Westmoreland manuscript was not used by Donne's early editors. It was discovered by Edmund Gosse in 1892.

It is likely, however, that a number of the other manuscripts were





sources for the seventeenth-century editions of Donne's poetry. Of these editions, the most important are 1633 and 1635. The subsequent five editions reproduce the ordering of 1635. The edition of 1633 contains the twelve sonnets of the first manuscript category, similarly ordered. Dame Helen and Grierson agree that a large portion of this edition is probably derived from a manuscript tradition that includes certain manuscripts of the first category, and both agree that these manuscripts are very reliable with regard to text and canon. The edition of 1635 contains sixteen sonnets, printed in an order that appears to be a conflation of the twelve 1633 sonnets and the additional four sonnets from a manuscript of the second or third category.

Both modern editors take, as their basic text, that of the first edition of each sonnet, excepting the three sonnets taken from the Westmoreland manuscript. The manuscripts are used for checking printing errors, and as a source for demonstrably superior readings. But with regard to the ordering of the Holy Sonnets the two editors differ. While Grierson takes his text for twelve of the sonnets from 1633, he takes his ordering of the first sixteen sonnets from the 1635 edition and adds at the end the three Westmoreland sonnets. He writes: "I cannot find a definite significance in any order, otherwise I should have followed that of W as the fullest and presumably the most authoritative" (II, 231). "Each sonnet," for Grierson, "is a separate meditation or ejaculation" (II, 231). Thus Grierson's ordering appears to give us a loosely-tied group of nineteen sonnets. I shall discuss the value of this ordering in my third chapter.

Dame Helen's ordering, on the other hand, divides the sonnets into



three groups, two of which, she argues, are sequentially arranged. Her first sequence consists of the twelve sonnets of the 1633 edition and the first manuscript category. Her second sequence consists of the four sonnets that were first published in the 1635 edition: "Thou hast made made me, and shall thy work decay," "O might those sighs and tears return again," "I am a little world made cunningly," and "If faithful souls be alike glorified." In 1635 these sonnets appear as the first, third, fifth, and eighth. Dame Helen, in extracting them, reverses the order of the third and fifth sonnets. Thus her second sequence is as follows: "Thou hast made me," "I am a little world," "O might those sighs and tears," and "If faithful souls." Dame Helen's third group consists of the three Westmoreland sonnets, which, she says, are indeed separate ejaculations.

Dame Helen's arguments for her reordering are based substantially on readings of the sonnets, and I shall discuss these readings in the following chapter. There is, however, one textual argument of some importance that ought to be summarized. As I have noted, both editors agree that a large portion of the 1633 edition, and that textually the best portion, derives from a single manuscript tradition. Dame Helen is willing to conjecture that the origin of the tradition is a collection of poems that Donne himself made with the intention of publishing. This, she feels, would help to account for the relative excellence of the text and accuracy of the canon. If this were so, then it could be argued that the ordering of the Holy Sonnets as they appear in 1633 represents the order in which Donne intended to publish them. The argument is intriguing, but we ought to remember that it is based





largely on conjecture, and that Dame Helen herself notes some textual difficulties involved in the theory. The argument is, at best, supportive evidence for a sequential ordering of twelve Holy Sonnets. It ought not be regarded as final proof.

Dame Helen's reordering of the Holy Sonnets must be evaluated by examining the arguments she advances in the second section of her general introduction to John Donne: The Divine Poems. These arguments deserve close attention for they have been highly praised by several eminent critics, two of whom have adopted Dame Helen's ordering in their editions of Donne's writings.<sup>3</sup> In my second chapter I shall discuss Dame Helen's arguments for reordering. I shall be concerned with determining whether, as she says, Donne intended to order the sonnets as she presents them. But I shall also be concerned with the value of Dame Helen's arrangement of the sonnets, whether Donne intended it or not. Even if Donne's intentions are finally undiscoverable, her ordering, if it clarifies our understanding of the individual sonnets and of their relation to each other, may still be preferable to other orderings.





## Chapter II

### Dame Helen Gardner's Argument for a Sequential Ordering of the Holy Sonnets

In the second section of her introduction, entitled "The Date, Order, and Interpretation of the Holy Sonnets," Dame Helen offers two major arguments for a reordering of the sonnets. In addition, she offers a series of supportive conjectures involving dates of composition, and an outline of the ordering of the Holy Sonnets in the manuscripts and early editions of Donne's poetry. A summary of the two major arguments will help to focus our inquiry.

The first argument is that a number of the sonnets are sequentially related according to subject matter. Dame Helen divides her first group, the twelve sonnets printed in the edition of 1633, into two sets of six, the first set being a meditative sequence on the subject of the Last Things, and the second set dealing with two aspects of a single theme, love. The four sonnets first printed in the 1635 edition are, she says, penitential sonnets on the subject of sin. The three sonnets preserved in the Westmoreland manuscript are, however, unconnected with each other and with the other sixteen sonnets. The second argument is that the same sonnets are also sequentially related according to a principle of order derived from Ignatian meditative practices. Thus, in the 1633 group the first sonnet is a preparatory prayer, the next three are meditative preludes, the fifth resembles a meditative point, the sixth is unaccounted for, while the last six correspond to the meditative colloquy. In Dame Helen's second sequence the first



sonnet is a preparatory prayer, and the second is a prelude, while the last two distantly resemble meditative points. The Westmoreland sonnets show no meditative influence.

Such a brief summary, of course, provides no basis for judgment; it will, however, provide a context for Dame Helen's readings of individual sonnets. We may begin with the long passage in which she gives the substance of her first argument:

When we look at the two sets of twelve sonnets, we see at once that while the set in the Group III manuscripts presents no obvious sequence, the twelve sonnets of Groups I and II, printed in 1633, form a coherent set of poems, and are by no means 'separate ejaculations'. The first six are quite clearly a short sequence on one of the most familiar themes for a meditation: death and judgement, or the Last Things. The first sonnet is a preparatory prayer before making a meditation, beginning with an act of recollection:

As due by many titles I resigne  
My selfe to thee, O God, first I was made  
By thee, and for thee, and when I was decay'd  
Thy blood bought that, the which before was thine...;

the second vividly imagines extreme sickness:

Oh my blacke Soule! now thou art summoned  
By sicknesse...;

the third, with equal vividness, imagines the very moment of death:

This is my playes last scene, here heavens appoint  
My pilgrimages last mile;

the fourth brings before us the general judgement at the Last Day:

At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow  
Your trumpets, Angells...;

the fifth is more discursive, but its subject is damnation; the sixth is on the death of Death at the resurrection of the just. The last six sonnets are less of a sequence; but they are on two aspects of a single theme, love. The first three (7-9) are concerned with the Atonement, and the mystery





of the Creator's love for his creatures, for whom he was willing to suffer death. The last three (10-12) reverse the theme and are on the love man owes to God and to his neighbour. The progress is clear: 'We love him because he first loved us.' I suggest that it is impossible when one reads these twelve sonnets in the order in which they were printed in the first edition, and as they appear in the two groups of manuscripts which have the higher authority, to resist the conclusion that they were intended to be read as a consecutive set of twelve, made up of two contrasted sets of six. For this reason I have returned to the first edition and print them as they appear there.

The set of twelve in the Group III manuscripts has ruined this sequence and makes no sense as it stands. But, if we take out from it the four sonnets which are interpolated there and in 1635, we see again that these four are related. Scattered through the Group III set they seem merely 'separate ejaculations'. Read together, as I have printed them, they are seen to be, if not so obviously a sequence, at least four sonnets on a single subject. They are all penitential and are linked by their common emphasis on sin and tears for sin. They also handle, in the manner of a meditation, a traditional subject for meditation.

On the other hand, the three sonnets which Westmoreland alone preserves are entirely unconnected with each other. They really deserve to be called 'separate ejaculations'. But they are also quite distinct in their inspiration from the sixteen which precede them in the manuscript. They owe nothing in either subject or treatment to the tradition of formal meditation.

(pp. xl-xli)

As is reflected in the proportioning of her discussion here and elsewhere, the first six sonnets of the 1633 set provide Dame Helen with her most convincing illustration of the possible sequential nature of the sonnets. She calls the first sonnet of the set a preparatory prayer, and a few pages farther on, quoting from The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, she outlines the structure of a meditation and describes the function of a preparatory prayer:

A meditation on the Ignatian pattern, employing the 'three powers of the soul', consists of a brief preparatory prayer,





two 'preludes', a varying number of points, and a colloquy. The preparatory prayer is 'to ask God our Lord for grace that all my intentions, actions and operations may be ordered purely to the service and praise of His divine Majesty'.  
(p. 1)

The quotation, however, is a little misleading since a preparatory prayer asks for grace, not in the performance of all intentions, actions, and operations, but, logically enough, only those involved in the meditation to follow. Louis Martz makes this clear: "The preparatory prayer is a simple, short request for grace in the proper performance of the exercise."<sup>1</sup> The octave of the first sonnet seems to work to create just such an attitude of ordered acquiescence by an act of resignation and by an enumeration of the various aspects of the relationship between God and man. But the impression of such an attitude disappears if we consider the entire sonnet, for the turn in the sestet introduces a tone that is hardly consonant with the intentions of a preparatory prayer as described above:

Why doth the devil then usurp on me?  
Why doth he steal, nay ravish that 's thy right?  
Except thou rise and for thine own work fight,  
Oh I shall soon despair, when I do see  
That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt not choose me,  
And Satan hates me, yet is loth to lose me.  
(II, 9-14)

Donne does not ask for grace in order that all intentions, actions, and operations in the following meditation may be ordered purely to service and praise; he asks God to rise and to fight the devil in order that he may be saved from despair. The bestowal of grace may well be implied as one of the ways in which the poet's despair may be prevented, but grace itself is not specifically mentioned, and in any case,



it is not requested for the specific purpose that St. Ignatius designates. The sonnet seems to be less a preparation for a subsequent meditation, than an impassioned appeal in itself. It gives the impression, not of order, but of imminent disorder.

Dame Helen describes the sonnet in this way: "In the octave of the first sonnet he recollects himself, remembers his creation and redemption and that he has received the gift of the Holy Spirit; in the sestet he laments the power of the devil upon him and asks for grace" (p. li). But surely this is to distort the sonnet. Dame Helen's remark implies, as do her other comments on the sonnet, that the octave is the important part of the poem. But it is the predicament described in the sestet that most concerns Donne, and the octave is merely preparatory to that. The point of the poem is that the act of resignation described in the octave has been futile. Despite the poet's efforts, the devil still overpowers him. It may be objected, then, that Dame Helen overemphasizes one part of the sonnet, and that the less significant part, so that she can argue for the sonnet's resemblance to a preparatory prayer. To justify this, she would have to argue that Donne failed in his attempt to write a proper preparatory prayer, and that she has discerned his true intentions despite this failure. Otherwise she will have distorted the meaning of the individual sonnet in the interests of a larger sequential ordering.

According to the Ignatian meditative pattern, two preludes follow the preparatory prayer. Dame Helen describes these preludes, again quoting from The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius:





The first prelude is what is called the compositio loci: the seeing 'with the eyes of the imagination' either a place...or, if the meditation is of an invisible thing such as sin, a situation....The second prelude is a petition 'according to the subject matter'....

The next three sonnets show very clearly the two preludes of a meditation, which correspond neatly to the two parts of a sonnet: the compositio loci occupying the octave, and the 'petition according to the subject' the sestet.

(pp. 1, 1i)

The last statement requires immediate qualification, for the correspondence is not so neat as Dame Helen implies it is. The first of the three sonnets ("Oh my black soul!") does give a compositio loci in the octave, but Dame Helen herself writes that the sestet "is hardly a petition, though it comes near to one" (p. lii). We might also note that in Dame Helen's reading of the second of the three ("This is my play's last scene") the compositio loci takes up the first twelve lines while the petition is confined to the last couplet. Thus, Dame Helen accurately describes only the structure of the third sonnet ("At the round earth's imagined corners").

But granting a modified meditative structure within each individual sonnet, how do the three sonnets function in sequence? If we glance back at the long quotation I have extracted, we find that, by quoting the first few lines of each sonnet, Dame Helen is able to present a progression from sickness to death to judgment. But can we see the first few lines of each poem as embodying the intention of the sonnet as a whole? If the poems give us a progression through the compositio loci of each, then in so far as the petition in the sestet is made "according to the subject," that is, according to the subject of the preceding compositio loci, it would be reasonable to expect the peti-





tions to give us a similar progression. In the first sonnet of the three, says Dame Helen, "Donne in the sestet draws out the moral: that grace will follow repentance, and that grace is needed to repent" (p. lii).

Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lack;  
But who shall give thee that grace to begin?  
(IV, 9-10)

The lines, as Dame Helen admits, are not a petition, but the problem confronted is a real one. The petition of the next sonnet, at least as Dame Helen seems to understand it,<sup>2</sup> is as follows:

Impute me righteous, thus purged of evil,  
For thus I leave the world, the flesh, and devil.  
(VI, 13-14)

And the petition of the third is, in short, "Teach me how to repent" (VII, 13). The petitions are obviously not sequentially related; one must be taught how to repent before one can be imputed righteous. Dame Helen argues for the sequential order of these three sonnets on the basis of the compositio loci of each, but we certainly must regard the petition as an equally important part of the meditative preludes. The fact that the petitions are not correspondingly sequential weakens her argument.

There is another problem concerning the second and third sonnets under consideration. It can be illustrated by quoting the pertinent lines from each sonnet:

And gluttonous death, will instantly unjoint  
My body, and soul, and I shall sleep a space,



But my 'ever-waking part shall see that face,  
Whose fear already shakes my every joint.

(VI, 5-8)

At the round earth's imagined corners, blow  
Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise  
From death, you numberless infinities  
Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go....

(VII, 1-4)

In the first passage the soul, at the moment of death, confronts God in heaven; in the second passage souls are spoken of as rising from death at the Last Judgment. The contradiction is remarkable because it involves what Dame Helen points out to be one of Donne's crucial theological beliefs. In the sermons, she says, "on one topic he is oddly insistent and dogmatic....He insists...that at death the virtuous soul goes immediately to heaven to enjoy the full vision of God" (pp. xliii-xliv). Now, even if Donne, when he composed the Holy Sonnets, had not made up his mind about what happens to the soul immediately after death, it seems unlikely that he would have allowed such a contradiction to stand if he had consciously intended the sonnets to work in sequence.

After the preludes, Dame Helen says, "The meditation proper follows, divided into points, usually three or five" (p. 1). She writes of the next two sonnets in her sequence ("If poisonous minerals" and "Death be not proud"):

The fifth sonnet...has no compositio loci--its octave is more like a 'point' drawn out from a meditation on hell--though its sestet contains a striking petition; while the sixth, the sonnet to Death, is only linked to the others by its subject; in manner and temper it is quite undevotional.

(p. lii)



Thus, according to Dame Helen, the fifth sonnet belongs in the sequence for two reasons: first, its octave resembles a meditative 'point,' and second, as claimed earlier, its subject is one of the Last Things, damnation. Both reasons are untenable. I shall take up the second reason first. If we read the whole sonnet, we can argue with as much evidence that the subject of the poem is "the mercy of God" and not "damnation." My point, however, is that either description is much too simplified an account to be of any use in accurately evaluating the sonnet. Dame Helen has again chosen to emphasize that part of the poem she finds useful for her argument and to ignore the remainder. The limitations of such a method are especially evident here, for the sestet, which she ignores, is superior to the octave, on which the sonnet's position in the sequence depends. The petition is, indeed, "striking":

of thine only worthy blood,  
And my tears, make a heavenly lethean flood,  
And drown in it my sin's black memory;  
That thou remember them, some claim as debt,  
I think it mercy, if thou wilt forget.

(IX, 10-14)

But for this petition to function in sequence it would have to precede the petition of the third sonnet, while following the petition of the fourth. Conceivably, one might beg initial grace to repent, beg to be taught to repent, beg to have one's sins forgotten, and only then beg to be imputed righteous.

Not only does Dame Helen's reading force us to overlook the significance of the sestet, it forces us to think less well of the octave than we might otherwise: since the idea of damnation is not so







vividly presented here as are the ideas of sickness, death, and judgment in the preceding three sonnets, the sonnet is labelled "more discursive" (p. xli); but discursiveness, if it occurs in a demanding-ly compact form such as the sonnet, will almost certainly be a vice of style.

But what of the octave's resemblance to a meditative point? Let us briefly recall that Ignatian meditation employs the "three powers of the soul" (p. l), the memory in the preludes, the reason in the points, and the will in the colloquy. We can perhaps assume that in a meditation the meditator will make a serious and sincere effort to bring his powers to bear as fully as possible upon the material of the meditation. With this in mind let us consider the octave of the fifth sonnet:

If poisonous minerals, and if that tree,  
Whose fruit threw death on else immortal us,  
If lecherous goats, if serpents envious,  
Cannot be damned; alas, why should I be?  
Why should intent or reason, born in me,  
Make sins, else equal, in me more heinous?  
And mercy being easy, and glorious  
To God, in his stern wrath, why threatens he?  
(IX, 1-8)

We can hardly be expected to believe that the first six lines are advancing a serious rational argument against the justice of damnation. The questions, which are, of course, blasphemous, are elaborated, not for the purpose of rational meditative inquiry, but in order to give the question of line ten--"But who am I, that dare dispute with thee / O God?"--as much impact as possible. The lines do not engage the reason as Dame Helen suggests they do--the "octave is more like a 'point' drawn out from a meditation on hell" (p. lii)--but rather employ the



reason perversely in order to justify its rejection in the sestet. In other words, the poet is purposely inhibiting the rational faculty in order to create a dramatic effect, and the lines cannot properly be called meditative. The poem resembles, not so much a meditative point, as the parody of meditative point. To take the lines seriously, as Dame Helen's argument implies we must, is to be confronted with a meditator who is unable to construct a satisfactory rational argument.

Dame Helen offers little more evidence than I have quoted above for the sequential nature of the last six sonnets of the 1633 group. She does, however, elaborate somewhat on the meditative influence in individual sonnets. I shall take up her points in some detail in the following chapter and, at present, concentrate on the arguments for a sequential ordering. The last six sonnets of the 1633 group are, according to Dame Helen, divisible into two groups of three, the last group of three following logically from the first group. The first three sonnets, she says, are concerned with God's love for man, while the last three are concerned with the love man owes God. The six poems do belong together; they appear together and in the same order in both Dame Helen's and Grierson's orderings. I cannot see, however, that they are sufficiently differentiated to be divided into two distinct groups. Here, for example, is the second sonnet of the last group, which, Dame Helen says, takes up the love man owes God:

Wilt thou love God, as he thee? then digest,  
My soul, this wholesome meditation,  
How God the Spirit, by angels waited on  
In heaven, doth make his temple in thy breast.





The Father having begot a Son most blessed,  
 And still begetting, (for he ne'er begun)  
 Hath deigned to choose thee by adoption,  
 Coheir to 'his glory, 'and Sabbath's endless rest;  
 And as a robbed man, which by search doth find  
 His stol'n stuff sold, must lose or buy it again:  
 The Son of glory came down, and was slain,  
 Us whom he had made, and Satan stol'n, to unbind.  
 'Twas much, that man was made like God before,  
 But, that God should be made like man, much more.  
 (XV, 1-14)

The poem consists of a question, a command to the poet's soul, and a twelve-line description of the proofs of God's wondrous love for man. The description is given by the poet for the benefit of his soul that it may realize the extent of love man should attempt to have for God. But, as in the first two sonnets of Dame Helen's first group, the final effect of the lines is to suggest the impossibility of man's ever loving God as God loves man. The octave of the sonnet differs from the first two sonnets in its concentration, not on man's weak and sinful nature, but on the will of God that deigns nevertheless to glorify man. But that is to say its subject is precisely the reverse of the subject Dame Helen attributes to it. Furthermore, the sestet closely resembles the sonnets of the first group in its concern with the mystery of the Atonement. The syntactical arrangement of the final couplet--"much, man, God/God, man, much more"--reinforcing the distinction between God's infinite love and man's imperfect love by intensifying our perception of the nature of his sacrifice, strives to create the sense of admiration and wonder for which the concluding couplets of the first two sonnets also strive:

God clothed himself in vile man's flesh, that so  
 He might be weak enough to suffer woe. (XI, 13-14)





But their Creator, whom sin, nor nature tied,  
 For us, his creatures, and his foes, hath died.  
 (XII, 13-14)

Again, the third sonnet in the last group is concerned primarily with God's blessings of life, law, and "all-healing grace and Spirit" (XVI, 11), and not with the love man owes to God. But Dame Helen's argument is most seriously deficient in its application to "Batter my heart." To say that the theme of the sonnet is the love man owes to God is to miss the whole point of the poem. A.L. French, in "The Psychopathology of Donne's Holy Sonnets," is certainly correct when he points to the last half of line nine as "an important clue to what the sonnet is really about--not Donne's desire to love God, but his desire that God should love him and his fear that He doesn't...."<sup>3</sup> I cannot see that an attempt to divide the sonnets into two groups distinguished by opposing treatments of the same theme achieves anything but a distortion of each sonnet. The similarities between five of the sonnets are too important and too obvious to admit of such a division, while the peculiarity of one ("Batter my heart") demands a much closer analysis than the one on which Dame Helen is prepared to base her reading.

Dame Helen's second reason for placing these sonnets in her sequence is that they resemble the Ignatian colloquy, the final stage of meditation involving "a free outpouring of the devotion aroused" (p. 11). Thus, the twelve sonnets of the 1633 edition so arranged form a complete meditation. I shall take up this claim in the first objection of my general commentary at the end of this chapter, along with the claim that the four 1635 sonnets also form a discernible meditation. First, however, I shall consider Dame Helen's comments on



the thematic nature of the 1635 sonnets.

What she has to say about the four sonnets is directed primarily toward establishing their thematic autonomy, for, while she has the support of several manuscripts and the edition of 1633 for printing the first twelve sonnets as she does, she has no textual support whatsoever for isolating the four sonnets first printed in 1635. Nor has she any textual support for printing them in the order in which they appear in her edition, where she has reversed the order of the second and third sonnets as they appear in the early manuscripts and editions. She explains her ordering in this way:

The sonnet which I have placed second, 'I am a little world', is a general meditation, with a very short compositio loci, in which Donne reminds himself, as St. Ignatius advised in meditating on sin, that both body and soul are given over to sin. This is followed by a long second prelude asking for repentance. The sonnet which I have place third, 'O might those sighes and teares', specifies a particular sin, 'sufferance', in the sense of indulgence, particularly indulgence in excessive and misdirected grief. Its particularity makes it more suitably follow than precede the sonnet on sin in general. It also leads onto the last, 'If faithful soules be alike glorifi'd', which develops a subsidiary point, arising out of the likeness and contrast between the tears he shed as a lover and the tears he sheds as a penitent....

(p. liii-liv)

Why should it be more suitable that a meditation on a particular sin follow a meditation on sin in general? It might be even more suitable to meditate on one's particular sins and then to generalize. In this way the generalization would partake of the force of the accumulated particularizations. Dame Helen's second point is arguable to a limited extent. The third and fourth sonnets in her sequence do take up idolatrous grief and penitent grief. But, as I shall show in the next





chapter, the two kinds of grief are discussed in the third sonnet ("O might those sighs and tears") for a rather peculiar reason, while in the fourth sonnet ("If faithful souls") the comparison is almost an incidental detail in a poem in which Donne's interest seems to be directed primarily toward the powers of perception possessed by faithful souls in heaven. Dame Helen describes the poems as "four sonnets on a single subject....all penitential and...linked by their common emphasis on sin and tears for sin" (p. xli). This is the essence of her reading, which she slightly expands later in the introduction. But the claim that the sonnets are penitential certainly does not mark them off from sonnets two, three, four, and five of Dame Helen's first group, which are also penitential. Nor is that claim perfectly accurate in itself. The phrase "common emphasis on sin and tears for sin" is somewhat equivocal. The first sonnet ("Thou hast made me") does not emphasize repentance at all and, moreover, differs markedly from the other three in its generalized treatment of the subject of sin. In the second sonnet ("I am a little world") Donne appears to reject tears of repentance as being insufficient for the purpose of purging his sins. And in the fourth sonnet ("If faithful souls") the only sins that Donne takes up are those of the other people mentioned in lines 9-12. The sonnets do not display a common emphasis on sin and tears for sin. To isolate them in this way is, again, to oversimplify and, thus, to distort their meaning, and to ignore their similarity to other sonnets in the 1633 group.

The nature of Dame Helen's method of argument can be made clearer by quoting her summary comment on the four 1635 sonnets:





The four sonnets are closely linked together. It is the sin in his 'feebled flesh' that weighs him down in the opening prayer; 'lust and envie' that have burned his little world in the second sonnet: indulgence which has caused him mourning that he mourns in the third.

(p. liv)

Using this method we could arrange the Holy Sonnets in any order we wished and demonstrate the sequential nature of that order simply by choosing out an appropriate word or phrase from each sonnet. The method encourages a fragmentary reading of the sonnets.

These particular objections to Dame Helen's reordering of the sonnets can be summarized as two general objections. The first general objection is that the systematized and precise method of meditation set down by St. Ignatius in The Spiritual Exercises has to be so distorted in its deployment over the twelve sonnets of 1633 and the four sonnets of 1635 that it cannot legitimately be called a principle of order. To repeat: "A meditation on the Ignatian pattern...consists of a brief preparatory prayer, two 'preludes', a varying number of points ["usually three or five"], and a colloquy" (p. 1). This pattern is deployed by Dame Helen over the twelve sonnets of the edition of 1633 in this manner: one sonnet devoted to a preparatory prayer, three sonnets embodying two preludes each, one sonnet resembling a meditative point, one sonnet unaccounted for by the meditative pattern, and six devoted to colloquy. It is deployed over the four 1635 sonnets in this manner: one sonnet devoted to a preparatory prayer, one sonnet containing the two preludes, and two sonnets resembling meditative points.

The question that arises from this distortion is whether, by not



following the formal pattern of meditation, the poet forfeits the virtues inherent in that pattern. This is, of course, not to deny that a poet might begin with the formal pattern of meditation and write a fine sequence of poems in which that pattern was consciously altered. But the virtues of the sequence would no longer be wholly those of formal meditation. And the greater the variation from the original pattern, the less valid would be any claim made on behalf of the sequence that it possessed the virtues of the original pattern. Dame Helen seems to be aware of this problem, but she tries to have it both ways. She bases her argument for a sequential ordering on what she feels to be a perceptible pattern of meditation, and yet praises Donne for not adhering to any formal pattern.

It is clear that she regards as valuable what she sees to be Donne's variations on the traditional pattern of formal meditation. After noting of the sixth sonnet in the sequence that "in manner and temper it is quite undevotional" (p. lii), Dame Helen writes:

This is what we should expect with Donne, who always as he writes develops his material in his own way. He is a poet using for his own purposes various elements from a familiar tradition; not a pious versifier, turning common material into rhyme.

(pp. lii-liii)

And a page farther on, she writes of the meditative influence on the 1635 sonnets (while also implicitly referring back to the 1633 sonnets):

The meditation on sin is the opening exercise of the Spiritual Exercises and Donne develops the subject on the lines suggested there. But here again he writes with the freedom of a poet whose imagination is not tied to an initial plan.

(p. liv)





But wherein lie the virtues of Donne's supposed departures from the traditional meditative format? It does not appear to occur to Dame Helen that such departures might have to be defended or that their accompanying virtues might have to be delineated. She has explained the disproportion of her meditative structure by endowing Donne with the modern irrational distrust of traditional form. What is worse, she countenances that distrust by admitting no distinction save that between an experimental poet and a pious versifier. She refuses to recognize that a poet might work within the limitations of a form and yet be something more than a pious versifier.

Dame Helen's comments above might lead us to believe that she acknowledges her distrust of traditional form and that what she finds remarkable about the Holy Sonnets is Donne's break with the traditional meditative format; but if we turn back once more to the long quotation I have extracted we find a further complication. Here, the rather obtrusive rhetoric works toward the conclusion that Donne's use of a recognizable meditative structure to create a sequence is so apparent as to be impossible to miss: "we see at once...by no means 'separate ejaculations'....quite clearly a short sequence," and a little later, "I suggest that it is impossible...to resist the conclusion that they were intended to be read as a consecutive set of twelve...." But if Donne is being as independent and original as Dame Helen has suggested in the quotations above, it seems unlikely that his intentions would be so obvious.

My first general objection is, thus, twofold. I object, first of all, to the invocation of the Ignatian meditative pattern as a prin-





ciple of order in the sequences, in so far as in its deployment over the two groups of sonnets the formal meditative structure simply loses the identity of its proportions. The result is that what I take to be the prime virtue of the Ignatian meditative process, balanced and authoritatively formal utterance, is forfeited with no comparable virtue taking its place. To that extent, whatever merit Dame Helen claims for the sequences on behalf of formal meditation is unjustified. Second, I object to Dame Helen's inconsistency in her claims for Ignatian meditation as an influence on the sequences of the Holy Sonnets. Her initial insistence on the value of the formal integrity of the meditative process runs counter to the praise she later accords Donne for independently developing his material. Moreover, she assumes, without demonstrating, the positive value of what she sees as Donne's departures from the formal Ignatian pattern.

My second general objection is somewhat less theoretical. It is that Dame Helen's argument for a sequential ordering of the sonnets according to subject matter depends on an extremely fragmentary reading of the sonnets. Such a reading results in an oversimplification of both the intellectual and the emotional content of individual poems. The progression "sickness, death, judgment, damnation" in sonnets two to five of the 1633 group, for example, is created by concentrating on a few lines in each poem to the exclusion of the remainder. Moreover, in the case of the fourth and fifth sonnets undoubtedly, and perhaps in the case of the second and third, the lines on which her reading is based are relatively inferior to the lines ignored. The method entails a failure to take hold of and to evaluate the diversity



of emotional experience offered in the sonnets. Her sequences tend to discourage a sensitivity to finer emotional nuances and to encourage the relegation of those complex (and sometimes contradictory) nuances into the categories of unadulterated love, fear, or tears for sin.

This failure to make the proper distinctions is accompanied by a failure to establish important similarities, among the last six sonnets of the 1633 group, for example, or between the sonnets of the 1635 group and the first five sonnets of the 1633 group. Neither does Dame Helen make any attempt to establish a connection between the three Westmoreland sonnets and the other sixteen; in fact, her reading demands that they be set apart. To restate my second objection: Dame Helen's ordering of the Holy Sonnets too often isolates what ought to be associated, and enforces a homogeneity where discriminations ought to be made.

It is possible that this failure to take hold adequately of the sonnets is the result of what seems to be Dame Helen's ultimate uncertainty as to the value of religious poetry. In the following passage she adopts Eliot's reservations concerning the motives of the religious poet:

In all poetry which attempts to represent the intercourse between an individual soul and its Maker there is a conflict between the ostensible emotion--adoring love, absorbed in the contemplation of its object, or penitence, overwhelmed by the sense of personal unworthiness--and the artist's actual absorption in the creation of his poem and his satisfaction in achieving perfect expression.  
(pp. xv-xvi)

Dame Helen perceives a conflict because she believes that a poet attempting to achieve perfect expression, that is, attempting to embody a full understanding of his experience in a poem is less sincere





than a poet who is absorbed or overwhelmed, in a word, possessed, by his experience. But the contrary may be urged. It is by mastering our experience rather than by allowing it to master us that we come to be able to speak authoritatively about it.

And here Dame Helen notes another constraint under which she believes the religious poet labours: "To create his image, the divine poet must omit more of himself than the love poet" (p. xvi). But the contrary must again be urged. The complexity and intensity of religious experience is, if we can believe our greatest poets, an undeniable fact. In one poem, "To Heaven," Ben Jonson can encompass a range of feeling, of thought, and of life that is rarely equalled in seventeenth-century secular poems of comparable length. A poem dealing with an important religious theme may conceivably be technically inferior to a love sonnet but that in no way detracts from the importance of the theme itself. Why should any critic ever feel the need to advance theoretical propositions denying a poet even the possibility of understanding his experience, religious or otherwise, in ways we had not previously thought possible?

I have had little to say of the virtues of Dame Helen's edition of the divine poems. Dame Helen and Louis Martz have performed a valuable act of recovery in bringing to our attention the acquaintance of several sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poets with Ignatian methods of meditation. That they detected this influence independently lends credence to their observations. The debt I owe to their work will be evident. I gratefully acknowledge it. The Ignatian method, I believe, does help to clarify the structure of several of the





Holy Sonnets, though, I must say, not to the extent Dame Helen claims it does. The Ignatian method, however, does not account at all for Dame Helen's ordering of the sonnets.

Yet because I have meditated therein, I will shortly acquaint you with what I think, for I would not be in danger of that law of Moses, That if a man dig a pit and cover it not, he must recompense those which are damaged by it, which is often interpreted of such as<sup>4</sup> shake old opinions, and do not establish new as certain.

My intention in the following chapter, now that I have done my best to shake the new opinion, is to re-establish the old.



### Chapter III

#### Devout Fits: Grierson's Ordering of the Holy Sonnets

A recent editor of Donne states that if the Holy Sonnets are separate ejaculations, as Grierson says they are, then "the order in which they are printed is not of consequence."<sup>1</sup> This would be true if the only alternative to a sequential ordering were an entirely random one--if the only criterion for a meaningful ordering were that the sonnets should follow one upon the other in a sequence culminating in the resolution of a particular problem. But there are other kinds of order than sequential order, and Grierson's arrangement of the sonnets is, obviously, not random. Grierson orders the sonnets according to consistent editorial principles. Since he cannot find a definite significance in any ordering, he uses the fullest ordering of the early printed editions, that of 1635, which contains four more sonnets than 1633, and he adds the three Westmoreland sonnets at the end. Our opinion of Grierson's ordering, therefore, depends largely on what we think of the edition of 1635.

There are two points to note about this edition, both of which provide a reason for accepting its ordering of the Holy Sonnets. First, the ordering of the sonnets in 1635 was retained in the later seventeenth-century editions of Donne's poetry. Thus, when we read the Holy Sonnets in this order, we are reading them as they were read by most people in the seventeenth century. The ordering possesses the authority of customary usage.

The second point concerns the origin of the 1635 ordering. This



ordering, as Grierson and Dame Helen note, appears to be the result of the integration of four unprinted sonnets from a manuscript of the second or third category (described in Chapter I), with the twelve sonnets of 1633. Dame Helen writes: "The obvious conflation of the two sets in 1635 we can ignore..." (p. xl). She seems to be saying that we can ignore the conflation because it is obvious. But the interesting thing about the conflation is that it is not so obvious. The obvious thing for the editor of 1635 to do would have been simply to extract the four unprinted sonnets from his manuscript and tack them onto the end of the 1633 sonnets. Instead, he chose the presumably more troublesome method of switching back and forth between manuscript and edition. Thus, the first nine sonnets of 1635 appear in the following order (with asterisks indicating the sonnets that were added to the 1633 sonnets):

\*Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?

As due by many titles I resign

\*O might those sighs and tears return again

Oh my black soul! now thou art summoned

\*I am a little world made cunningly

This is my play's last scene, here heavens appoint

At the round earth's imagined corners, blow

\*If faithful souls be alike glorified

If poisonous minerals, and if that tree,

It seems possible that the editor took this trouble because he found the less obvious conflation to be for some reason a more appropriate ordering.





There is evidence that the editor of 1635 was fairly conscientious and that in his layout he took some account of what the poems said. Grierson states that the arrangement of Donne's poems in 1633 is "generally chaotic" (II, lix). He surmises that the arrangement is the result of the editor's practice of taking batches of poems from various manuscripts as they came to hand. The two Anniversaries, for example, are printed in the midst of the Songs and Sonnets, while the Holy Sonnets, including "La Corona," appear near the beginning of the volume, preceded only by "The Progress of the Soul." It was the editor of 1635 who arranged in print Donne's poems according to genre, and who put the generic groups in the order that is now generally followed, beginning with the Songs and Sonnets and concluding with the religious verse. Since he made this effort to arrange Donne's poems according to a generic principle of order, it is wrong to dismiss summarily his ordering of the Holy Sonnets as the meaningless conflation Dame Helen implies it is.

The best way of evaluating the appropriateness of the ordering of the first sixteen sonnets in 1635 and Grierson's ordering of the nineteen sonnets is to go to the poems themselves. In the discussion of individual sonnets that follows, I shall consider three general matters: the appropriateness of the 1635 editor's integration of the four unprinted sonnets into the 1633 group, the value of the 1635 editor's ordering of the first sixteen sonnets, and the value of printing the sonnets in a single group as Grierson does.

Donne's Holy Sonnets I and II are both prayers addressed to God. They deal with the same subject matter--man's enfeeblement by sin, the



power that the devil exercises over man in his weakened state, and the power that God might oppose to the devil's if He so chose--in a general and expository style. Furthermore, if the two sonnets are read together as they are printed in Grierson's edition, it is apparent that their treatments of this material are complementary. But since Sonnet I is the first unprinted sonnet that was interpolated into the ordering of 1633 by the editor of 1635, Dame Helen places it in her second sequence, thus obscuring the relationship between the two sonnets. The octave of Sonnet I contains a generalized account of the poet's, and by extension man's, predicament:

Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?  
 Repair me now, for now mine end doth haste,  
 I run to death, and death meets me as fast,  
 And all my pleasures are like yesterday,  
 I dare not move my dim eyes any way,  
 Despair behind, and death before doth cast  
 Such terror, and my feeble flesh doth waste  
 By sin in it, which it towards hell doth weigh;  
(I, 1-8)

The sonnet begins with a question and a brief, but urgent plea--"Repair me now." Donne then proceeds to sketch out man's precarious situation. In line three he describes himself as hastening toward death, and in line five we have the paralysis of terror that this realization induces. It is impossible for him to step aside from the death before him; behind him is despair, the issue of the sins which, in turn, weigh him down towards hell. The poet is threatened on all sides but one:

Only thou art above, and when towards thee  
 By thy leave I can look, I rise again;





But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,  
 That not one hour I can myself sustain;  
 Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his art,  
 And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart.

(I, 9-14)

Salvation is presented as a possibility, but as being by no means assured. Man may rise, but only through God's intervention between the devil and man, for his decay and resulting weakness preclude any movement toward God not initiated and sustained by God Himself. This is made clear in lines ten and twelve: it is by God's leave that man turns to God, and it is with the help of God's grace that man will be sustained from sin, since his independent efforts to sustain himself are of no avail. Of course, the sonnet does not rule out the possibility that with grace man's efforts to sustain himself through repentance can be of value; and, indeed, we shall find the idea of repentance introduced in six of the first nine sonnets. But if the sonnet does not exclude this possibility, neither does it explicitly draw hope from it; the terror of mortality and the oscillation in lines 8-14 between the possibilities of damnation and salvation strongly substantiate the poet's fear and uncertainty. In essence, the poet describes his fallen state, pleads for grace, and describes the effect that the bestowal of grace would have on him. The matter is important, the tone appropriate, and the style plain.

The second sonnet takes up man's fallen state, not by describing that state, but by considering man's former closeness to God:

As due by many titles I resign  
 Myself to thee, O God, first I was made  
 By thee, and for thee, and when I was decayed  
 Thy blood bought that, the which before was thine,



I am thy son, made with thy self to shine,  
 Thy servant, whose pains thou hast still repaid,  
 Thy sheep, thine image, and, till I betrayed  
 My self, a temple of thy Spirit divine;

(II, 1-8)

The method is again expository and the tone, properly humble. The poet is concerned with producing an exhaustive list of the titles by which man belongs to God. But the sestet acknowledges the inefficacy of the act of resignation undertaken in the octave.

Why doth the devil then usurp on me?  
 Why doth he steal, nay ravish that 's thy right?  
 Except thou rise and for thine own work fight,  
 Oh I shall soon despair, when I do see  
 That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt not choose me,  
 And Satan hates me, yet is loth to lose me.

(II, 9-14)

Lines 9-10 give us three increasingly violent ways in which the devil effects man's decay, and the last four lines again stress the necessity of God's intervention. The poet asks the question of line nine because he perceives that, though he has resigned himself to God, the devil still usurps on him. And in lines 11-12 Donne describes what will happen if God does not aid him by fighting the devil: he will despair when he sees that God refuses to choose him, though He loves mankind.

To summarize: in Sonnet II, the first 1633 sonnet, Donne more or less reverses the line of argument followed in Sonnet I, the first interpolated sonnet in 1635. In the first sonnet he begins by describing his present state, near despair, and then explains what will happen if God grants him grace. In the second sonnet he begins by describing his former state of grace, and his present desire for grace, and then explains what will happen if God does not grant him grace. With God's





help man may be saved; without it, he is surely damned. The sonnets delineate the two possible ultimate states of being by describing, in the first, the effect of God's grace, and in the second, the effect of the withdrawal of God's grace. In this way the two sonnets mark off the concerns of the religious poet, and, thus, are a fit introduction to the sonnets that follow.

Donne takes up three ideas in the first nine sonnets with some regularity. The first two, man's sinfulness and God's grace, we have noted in Sonnets I and II. The third, repentance, is the subject of Sonnet III. That these ideas recur through the first nine sonnets makes it desirable that the sonnets be loosely associated; that the ideas receive such varied treatment in the different sonnets makes it desirable that each sonnet be allowed to stand on its own merits. One danger of a conjectural sequential ordering such as Dame Helen's is that we may overlook or ignore problems of interpretation or faults in the individual sonnets in order to maintain the integrity of the sequence. Another danger, which I shall discuss with regard to Sonnet VI, is that we may overlook the distinctive greatness of individual sonnets for the same reason.

Sonnet III, the second sonnet that the editor of 1635 integrated into the 1633 group, introduces the subject of repentance through a singular argument. Donne begins the sonnet with a six-line lament in which he deplores his past preoccupation with profane love:

O might those sighs and tears return again  
 Into my breast and eyes, which I have spent,  
 That I might in this holy discontent  
 Mourn with some fruit, as I have mourned in vain;





In mine idolatry what showers of rain  
 Mine eyes did waste! what griefs my heart did rent!  
 (III, 1-6)

In their mellifluous beauty the lines are stylistically indistinguishable from the poetry characteristic of the idolatry that is being deplored. The metre moves with a smoothness we associate with Sidney: accented and unaccented syllables do not differ widely in the degree of absolute stress each receives. The syntactical arrangement is highly symmetrical: the structure of the first two lines--the first line containing a barely perceptible caesura and running over smoothly into the second line--is repeated in lines 3-4 and lines 5-6 with only slight variation in the placement of the caesura. And the sense is so amplified that the lines become obtrusively lachrymose. They depend on controlled Petrarchan cliché for their meaning: we are asked to accept the sighs and tears as being of some value, perhaps as representing some losses of greater value, without demanding a more precise definition of that value. For a more direct and forceful statement of those greater losses we must go elsewhere. Here, for example, is the sestet of Sonnet LXXXIV ("Farewell sweet boy") of Caelica, by Fulke Greville:

I bow'd not to thy image for succession,  
 Nor bound thy bow to shoot reformed kindness,  
 Thy plays of hope and fear were my confession,  
 The spectacles to my life was thy blindness;  
 But Cupid now farewell, I will go play me,  
 With thoughts that please me less and less betray me.<sup>2</sup>

In the octave Greville has developed the theme of his former selfless loyalty to love. Of this poem Richard Waswo writes:

The irony [developed in the octave] is intensified in the sestet by the disavowal of ulterior motive: his service,



and hence his folly, was not only complete and exclusive, it was pure. It sought to obtain neither progeny nor reward, but rather a religious subordination of self, which had the natural result of circumscribing the vision of the man by that of the deity he worshipped.<sup>3</sup>

The paraphrase in the last half of the last sentence just quoted is as aptly put as the fourth line of the sestet of Greville's sonnet, which it paraphrases. Both the line and the paraphrase give us something that Donne's lines do not: a precise definition of the waste involved in a preoccupation with profane love. Greville spends no time simply exclaiming over the loss as Donne does; he is concerned with understanding the extent of the loss and its moral implications. Those implications, as Waswo notes, are embodied in the perception, implied throughout the poem and forcefully made explicit in the final couplet, that the poet has no one but himself to blame for his folly.

Donne, also, accepts responsibility for his sin, but for a reason quite different from Greville's. The next two lines of Sonnet III, which are distinct in style from the preceding lines, state the perception behind the poem:

That sufferance was my sin, now I repent;  
Because I did suffer I must suffer pain.

(III, 7-8)

And the sestet is taken up with an expansion of the ironical observation that the poet's old suffering is the cause of his new suffering. Donne illustrates the necessarily extreme vehemence of his own grief by comparing it with the grief of others:

Th' hydroptic drunkard, and night-scouting thief,  
The itchy lecher, and self tickling proud





Have the remembrance of past joys, for relief  
 Of coming ill. To poor me is allowed  
 No ease; for, long, yet vehement grief hath been  
 The effect and cause, the punishment and sin.

(III, 9-14)

Other sinners, leaving their sins, have at least pleasurable memories of past debauches for solace in their decrepitude; but Donne's sin was not even pleasurable. Deprived of any such ease, he must grieve for past grief.

Though Donne's sonnet, in comparison with Greville's, initially seems wittier and more engaging, the wit is employed in a relatively trivial undertaking. The sonnet does embody an acceptance of the necessity of repentant grief, but only for the ultimate purpose of pointing out the extreme nature of the poet's own grief. What attitude can we be expected to assume toward such a demonstration? Pity? Possibly detached amusement? Neither attitude seems perfectly appropriate, though the former seems more probable in the context of the Holy Sonnets. But pity is difficult to feel when it is asked for in such a self-indulgent manner. Donne's effort to make his own state appear exceedingly miserable, and therefore pitiable, is a bar to a completely satisfying response to the poem. Yet the sonnet is not completely unsuccessful in its attempt to impart an understanding of the waste, misdirection, and therefore sinfulness of the poet's old idolatry. The plain succinctness of lines 7-8 clearly conveys the poet's bitter regret at this waste. Such regret is appropriate to the preoccupation with man's sinfulness manifested in the first nine sonnets.

This preoccupation is especially evident in Sonnet IV. Here, Donne's intense, almost Calvinistic, conviction of his own sinfulness



is the basis for another idea that is recurrent in the sonnets: the idea that the incapacity of the understanding severely limits its usefulness in the matters of repentance and salvation. In the octave of the fourth sonnet Donne compares his soul to a traitor and a condemned criminal:

Oh my black soul! now thou art summoned  
 By sickness, death's herald, and champion;  
 Thou art like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done  
 Treason, and durst not turn to whence he is fled,  
 Or like a thief, which till death's doom be read,  
 Wisheth himself delivered from prison;  
 But damned and haled to execution,  
 Wisheth that still he might be imprisoned;

(IV, 1-8)

Donne presents to his sinful soul two men in predicaments similar to the soul's. We perceive the similarity, not in the detail itself, but in the generalization, which we are expected to recognize, that lies behind the detail: man's inconstancy promotes his continuing in sin, as well as ensuring his vain repentance afterwards.

But the four-line description of the thief has an effect apart from simply particularizing the proper generalization. The thief is interesting in himself, and not just in relation to the subject to which he is compared. The succinctness and air of ease with which Donne fixes the irony of the thief's contrary wishes strengthen the independence of the perception. In fact, the vehicle is more interesting than the tenor. Yet for Dame Helen the pilgrim and the thief are "excellent examples of 'congruous thoughts'" (p. lii), "vivid images" created by the meditator "to make himself realize the situation" (p. li). Here is an instance in which Dame Helen's placing the poem in the context of a meditative sequence encourages misinterpre-





tation and disguises a problem in the poem. The problem is that the vividness with which the thief's predicament is presented tends to obscure the crucial point of the comparison, which is not how the soul is like, or congruous with, the thief, but rather how the two differ. Line nine defines the single essential point of difference between the condemned criminal and Donne's soul, while line ten introduces a complication:

Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lack;  
But who shall give thee that grace to begin?  
(IV, 9-10)

And what appears, at first, to be an answer to this question follows in the last four lines:

Oh make thyself with holy mourning black,  
And red with blushing, as thou art with sin;  
Or wash thee in Christ's blood, which hath this might  
That being red, it dyes red souls to white.  
(IV, 11-14)

But the last four lines are not an answer. Soul, you are approaching the moment of death, when you will be destroyed for your sins. If, however, you repent, you may yet obtain grace. But how will you obtain the grace that is necessary to begin to repent? Repent, or wash in Christ's blood. If the last four lines are an answer to the question of line ten, then Donne has initiated an infinite regression, since we must now ask where the initial grace comes from that allows one to perform this act of repentance. St. Thomas avoided this problem by presupposing the initial, unmerited "gratuitous help of God," which moves man inwardly enabling him to turn to God.<sup>4</sup> But this





presupposition is not in the sonnet, nor can it justifiably be read between the lines.

It is possible that Donne here attempts to answer one of the profound questions of Christian theology and does it clumsily. It is more probable, however, that he does not attempt to answer the question, but rather attempts to make use of the emotional effect that the simple raising of the question generates. The imperative in line eleven may perform implicitly the function performed explicitly by line nine of the ninth sonnet, "But who am I, that dare dispute with thee / O God?" That is, it may be a rejection of the invitation to rational argument offered in lines 9-10, a rejection resulting from the realization that God's ways are inaccessible to man's reason. The last four lines, then, would represent Donne's exhortation to his soul to concentrate on the performance of those acts of faith within the compass of man's abilities: first, take on the outward and visible forms of repentance while trusting to God for the inward grace that will inspire those forms with sincere regret, and second, turn to Christ, who has absolved us of original sin by His Atonement. The point to be drawn from this reading is that Donne's interest in his subject matter here is not primarily analytic. It is not the sort of interest that promotes the sustained thought that might help to tie together a sequence of poems.

The point can be substantiated by a brief examination of Sonnet V, the third interpolated sonnet. Initially, it might be argued, this sonnet is analytic. Donne begins with a description of the effect that sin has had on his being:



I am a little world made cunningly  
 Of elements, and an angelic sprite,  
 But black sin hath betrayed to endless night  
 My world's both parts, and, oh, both parts must die.  
(V, 1-4)

But, as in the octave of Sonnet IV, Donne seems to be more interested in developing the vehicle of the poem for its own sake than for the purpose of illuminating the tenor. In the next passage the idea of man as a microcosm is somewhat incongruously developed:

You which beyond that heaven which was most high  
 Have found new spheres, and of new lands can write,  
 Pour new seas in mine eyes, that so I might  
 Drown my world with my weeping earnestly,  
 Or wash it if it must be drowned no more:  
(V, 5-9)

It is difficult at first to see how the passage continues the line of argument. We might think the new seas are required because the old seas are quantitatively insufficient to drown or wash the poet. But "new" probably has the connotation of "incorrupt." The poet wants new, incorrupt seas because his old seas have been corrupted by sin. This is all very well until we ask what the request can possibly mean outside of the analogical context. If the request is simply for tears of repentance, then Donne has chosen an extremely inflated manner in which to make the request. Furthermore, it appears from the final lines that repentance is not what is required for effacing the poet's sins:

But oh it must be burnt; alas the fire  
 Of lust and envy have burnt it heretofore,  
 And made it fouler; let their flames retire,





And burn me O Lord, with a fiery zeal  
 Of thee and thy house, which doth in eating heal.  
 (V, 10-14)

Thus, although the idea of repentance is found in the sonnet, it is not quite accurate to call the poem a penitential sonnet, since Donne rejects penitence in favour of "fiery zeal." But Donne nowhere makes clear what "fiery zeal" is; he seems more interested in describing the contrary effects of the two kinds of fire on his world.

In short, the impact of the sonnet derives from the development of an analogy that draws attention away from the real problem with which the sonnet opens. What begins as a mode of analysis becomes a vehicle for the expression of ideas which, however beguiling, are never made relevant to the immediate concerns of the poem. That Donne is betrayed by his ingenuity to a greater or lesser extent in Sonnets III to V is apparent when the sonnets are compared with the following two sonnets.

The value of Sonnet VI rests on a problem of interpretation that has yet to be resolved. The problem can be illustrated by quoting the sonnet and then quoting two comments by critics.

This is my play's last scene, here heavens appoint  
 My pilgrimage's last mile; and my race  
 Idly, yet quickly run, hath this last pace,  
 My span's last inch, my minute's latest point,  
 And gluttonous death, will instantly unjoint  
 My body, and soul, and I shall sleep a space,  
 But my'ever-waking part shall see that face,  
 Whose fear already shakes my every joint:  
 Then, as my soul, to heaven her first seat, takes flight,  
 And earth-born body, in the earth shall dwell,  
 So, fall my sins, that all may have their right,  
 To where they are bred, and would press me, to hell.



Impute me righteous, thus purged of evil,  
 For thus I leave the world, the flesh, and devil.  
 (VI, 1-14)

Dame Helen gives this paraphrase of the sestet: "...it [the soul] wings its flight to heaven, leaving its body in earth and its sins fallen to hell" (p. xlv). The comment is brief but sufficient for determining Dame Helen's, and what seems to be the generally accepted, reading of lines 9-12: At death, just as my soul returns to heaven and my body returns to earth, so my sins return to their place of origin. A.L. French reads the lines in this way, but finds them unsatisfactory for a very good reason:

It is understandable that his body will lie in the earth, and conceivable that his soul will go to heaven; but the notion that his "sinnes", somehow dissociated from the person who committed them, will fall away to hell, strikes me as rather queer. It is also hard to see how we get from the face that is terrifying because (presumably) it may condemn him to perdition, to the confidence about his soul simply "taking flight" to a heaven from which in the previous line he thought he might be for ever excluded.<sup>5</sup>

The apparent discrepancy between the fear expressed in the octave and the seemingly effortless purgation of the sestet is odd indeed, especially in light of the uneasiness with which Donne regards the possibility of his damnation in other sonnets. Both Dame Helen and A.J. Smith think that Donne is purged of his sins through penitence. Here is Dame Helen's note on "Impute me righteous": "Although purged of its actual sins by penitence, the soul is not righteous--it bears the 'imputed guilt' of Adam..." (p. 67). There is, however, nothing whatsoever about penitence in the poem.

But Donne's sins are not falling; rather, he prays to God to fall



them. Donne is not purged of his sins in the sestet; he is praying to be purged. The tone is, thus, consistent throughout the poem. The use of the verb "fall" in the transitive sense is now obsolete, but it appears to have been in common enough literary use in Donne's time. Shakespeare uses a form of "to fall" on at least three occasions with the sense of "to let fall." In Richard III:

To-morrow in the battle think on me,  
And fall thy edgeless sword: despair, and die!--<sup>6</sup>

In As You Like It:

...The common executioner,  
Whose heart th' accustom'd sight of death makes  
hard,  
Falls not the axe upon the humbled neck  
But first begs pardon:...<sup>7</sup>

And in The Tempest:

Draw together;  
And when I rear my hand, do you the like,  
To fall it on Gonzalo.<sup>8</sup>

Greville uses "fall" in the same sense in Sonnet XXXVII of Caelica:

...he hath fallen his father's can,  
All of gold in the deep.<sup>9</sup>

The transitive form of "fall" could also be used with the sense of "to overthrow," a sense of which Donne's use in Sonnet VI seems to partake. The OED offers two instances of this usage, the dates of each falling about an equal number of years on either side of 1609, the conjectured date of composition of Donne's sonnet. The first example is from 1586:





"By desire men are enflamed, by anger kindled, fallen by error." The second is from 1629: "The serpent doth...bruise our heele and so fall us."

With this possible interpretation we may return to the sonnet. Donne begins Sonnet VI as he begins Sonnets IV and V--with a realization of imminent death and possible damnation. But the octave of the sixth sonnet is less affected than that of either the fourth or fifth. The compactness of the first quatrain is a distinct virtue as is the handling of the first half of line three. With the enjambment of line two, stress is shifted to the first syllable of line three. The stress pattern of "Idly, yet quickly run" gives us two heavy stresses on the first syllables of the key words separated by a light syllable, a pause, and another light syllable. In the midst of the slow, deliberate movement of the rest of the quatrain, the rhythmic shift helps to bring the paradox, "Idly, yet quickly," into sharp relief, and the paradox gives us a literally damning moral judgment. In the second quatrain the apprehensiveness at the imminence of death becomes fear at the thought of a face to face confrontation with God, whose fearfulness is already terrifying. The phrasing in the lines is slightly awkward with the result that in line six the pronoun "I" has as its antecedent "body." As Dame Helen points out (p. xlv), the phrase "I shall sleep a space" is probably the unrevised portion of an earlier reading:

...and I shall sleep a space,  
Or presently, I know not, see that Face,  
Whose fear already shakes my every joint.

The question is why Donne revised line seven without altering the



phrasing of line six. One might conjecture: "...and one shall sleep a space, / But my 'other waking part...." I can, however, offer no solution except that of its being a minor oversight on Donne's part. As it stands the line is puzzling but not obscure.

From the indirect introduction of God in the last two lines of the octave, Donne turns to direct address in the sestet in order to make a two-fold prayer. The word "Then" in line nine provides the continuity of thought that links octave and sestet. It has the sense of "in light of" and lines 9-12 say something like this: "God, in light of the proper fear with which I am already overcome, as my soul and body will return to their original elements, so, at death, let my sins fall to their original element, hell, in order that all may have their right." In the final couplet Donne voices the second part of his prayer, which, as Dame Helen and Smith note, is that he may be imputed free of original sin after having been purged of his own sins.

As far as I am able to understand it, the sestet attains a measure of dignity that is wanting in the preceding two sonnets where Donne's striving for dramatic emotional intensity results in a melodramatic effect. Furthermore, the sonnet is properly humble in a way that Sonnet III fails to be. Yet such dignity does not override the personal note: to pray to God and lay out in detail an argument for the prayer is just the sort of thing Donne would do. It might be objected that the argument that all ought to have their right is mere quibble, but I do not think it is: as any Christian knows, all will have their right in the end. Lines 9-12 are both extraordinarily powerful and concise. Indeed, in their conciseness resides much of their force. They stand in effective contrast to the involved





ingenuity of the preceding three sonnets.

Sonnet VII gives us the clearest statement of Donne's belief in the efficacy of repentance. The panoramic grandeur of the octave moves easily into a forceful statement of the necessity of repentance in lines 11-12, and the final plea to be taught how to repent. And though it is true that in many of his poems Donne exhibits "a relative unawareness of the nature and importance of sound" and that most often in his verse "the meter has the effect of a convention observed or of an obstacle overcome rather than of an instrument employed,"<sup>10</sup> nevertheless, the sestet of Sonnet VII is a notable exception:

But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space,  
For, if above all these, my sins abound,  
'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace,  
When we are there; here on this lowly ground,  
Teach me how to repent; for that's as good  
As if thou hadst sealed my pardon, with thy blood.  
(VII, 9-14)

The lines are masterly. The syntax is natural and clear, and the rhythms are devoid of harshness. The lines move as a single statement that has its focal point at the caesura in line twelve. The suspension of syntactical closure at the end of lines ten and eleven enforces the pause after "there" that counterpoints it perfectly with "here," beginning the final plea. The plea itself is both properly humble and dignified. God's teaching repentance to the poet will be as efficacious as if God sealed a full pardon with His blood; but it will also be as efficacious as the pardon Christ has, in fact, already sealed in blood. Repentance and Christ's sacrifice are both necessary for salvation and therefore, in that sense, equal, each as good as the



other. The sestet exemplifies that middle style that Ben Jonson praises for its "just stature": "There the language is plain, and pleasing: even without stopping, round without swelling; all well-turned, composed, elegant, and accurate."<sup>11</sup> It is the style of some of Donne's finest verse, secular and religious. We can find it in "A Hymn to God the Father," and "H.W. In Hibernia Belligeranti," as well as in Holy Sonnet VI.

In their distinguished style and clarity of statement Sonnets VI and VII are the finest of the Holy Sonnets. It is difficult to imagine how the poems could be enhanced by being placed in sequence with other Holy Sonnets. This judgment, however, suggests a problem that ought to be confronted. It can, of course, be argued that the greatness of these two sonnets does not preclude the possibility of their functioning in a sequence with other, and lesser, Holy Sonnets, since it can hardly be expected that all poems in a sequence will be equally fine. But, as I have tried to make clear in my readings of the two sonnets, their virtues derive from an inspiration that is different, not only in degree but also in kind, from the inspiration that is the source of Sonnets III, IV, V, and, as we shall see, IX. The propriety of tone and clarity of conception in Sonnets VI and VII derive from a profound understanding of the sacrifice that is required by what Richard Waswo calls "the objective metaphysic of redemption": "the forsaking of self in the operation of the basic Christian paradox that to find life is to lose it."<sup>12</sup> Thus, in these two sonnets, and, it might be noted, in Sonnet I, Donne's motives are self-effacing, not self-centred. He is concerned with subduing as far as possible "the individuating desires and fears of the sinful self"<sup>13</sup> in





the attempt to strike through to those desires and fears that concern all men. On the other hand, in Sonnets III, IV, V, and IX individuating desires and fears are Donne's primary concern. This is most apparent in the argument of Sonnet III, which works to isolate the poet's grief from the grief of others, but it is also clear in the melodramatic emotion expressed in the other sonnets, for such emotion can hardly be shared by the reader, even if he approves of it. It is this fundamental opposition of motives in the sonnets that works against their functioning in a unified sequence.

Sonnet VIII is the last sonnet that the editor of 1635 integrated into the 1633 group. It has a structure and intellectual and emotional simplicity that prefigure some of George Herbert's verse. In this it is unique among the first nine Holy Sonnets; its theme, however, justifies its position in the 1635 ordering. In the first eleven and a half lines Donne speculates on whether or not glorified souls are able to apprehend the poet's mind as angels do, that is, "immediately" or intuitively:

If faithful souls be alike glorified  
 As angels, then my father's soul doth see,  
 And adds this even to full felicity,  
 That valiantly I hell's wide mouth o'erstride:  
 But if our minds to these souls be descried  
 By circumstances, and by signs that be  
 Apparent in us, not immediately,  
 How shall my mind's white truth by them be tried?  
 They see idolatrous lovers weep and mourn,  
 And vile blasphemous conjurers to call  
 On Jesus' name, and pharisaical  
 Dissemblers feign devotion.

(VIII, 1-12)

The argument seems designed to lead to an impasse. If faithful souls





in heaven can perceive as angels, then they will perceive Donne's mind's white truth; if, on the other hand, they must infer from outward signs, they may be unable to distinguish true devotion from false shows. And, in the final lines Donne turns aside from the impasse:

...Then turn  
O pensive soul, to God, for he knows best  
Thy true grief, for he put it in my breast.  
(VIII, 12-14)

Although it is not stated explicitly, Donne's "true grief" probably is, as Dame Helen thinks, grief for sins, and though the main interest of the sonnet lies in the theological speculation of the first twelve lines, it is worth noting that the final couplet acknowledges that the source of this repentant grief is, ultimately, God. The poem, then, is a variation on the theme of the first two sonnets--man's complete dependence on God.

I have already grouped Sonnet IX with Sonnets III to V as a poem in which Donne's tendency to overdramatize his emotions works to the poem's detriment. We can discern this tendency by considering a passage from Louis Martz's The Poetry of Meditation in which Martz describes what he sees to be the meditative influence on the sonnet. He finds in the ninth sonnet "a threefold structure of composition (memory), analysis (understanding), and colloquy (affections, will)."<sup>14</sup> According to Martz, in the first quatrain "an example of Donne's besetting sin of intellectual pride is 'proposed' in an audacious, blasphemous evasion of responsibility":



If poisonous minerals, and if that tree,  
 Whose fruit threw death on else immortal us,  
 If lecherous goats, if serpents envious  
 Cannot be damned; alas, why should I be?

(IX, 1-4)

Martz continues: "The problem thus set forth concretely is then pursued abstractly in the second quatrain, which reveals the speaker's knowledge of the proper theological answer to his question, but he continues the evasion and increases the blasphemy by first an implied ('borne in mee'), and then a direct attack, on God's justice":

Why should intent or reason, born in me,  
 Make sins, else equal, in me more heinous?  
 And mercy being easy, and glorious  
 To God, in his stern wrath, why threatens he?

(IX, 5-8)

And finally: "But at last, and very suddenly, the thin wall of this uneasy argument collapses and the poem concludes with one of Donne's most vehement colloquies, giving the answer that has been implicit and premeditated throughout":<sup>15</sup>

But who am I, that dare dispute with thee  
 O God? Oh! of thine only worthy blood,  
 And my tears, make a heavenly lethean flood,  
 And drown in it my sin's black memory;  
 That thou remember them, some claim as debt,  
 I think it mercy, if thou wilt forget.

(IX, 9-14)

This is probably about as strong an argument as could be mustered on behalf of the poem. It is, however, questionable in an important respect. Clearly, Martz does not believe that Donne intends us to take the first eight lines as a serious questioning of the justice of damnation. In this, he probably is correct. The octave, he feels, is





"proposed" in the full "knowledge of the proper theological answer" to the objections raised, and it is proposed to make the turn in the sestet even more striking than it is in itself. But if Donne does not take his arguments seriously, how can we? Once we have worked through the octave and discerned that Donne is merely playing at blasphemy, the lines will no longer seem to contain a note of choler, but rather the mere affectation of choler. If we know why men can be damned, and if we know that Donne knows why men can be damned, the questions in the octave can only be irritating. As a result, the lines will not serve to counterpoint the devotion of the sestet; they will be rather a piece of tedious, emotionless rhetoric to be hurried through or avoided completely.

In the last five lines Donne asks that his sins may be effaced by means of the blood of Christ and his own tears of repentance, which will atone for original sin and the poet's own sins respectively. The final couplet is initially striking but is, upon inspection, somewhat puzzling. Line thirteen, according to Dame Helen and Smith, says that some men ask God to remember their sins as a debt that God may then pardon. In line fourteen Donne asks that his sins be forgotten. But why does Donne need to make the distinction at all? Does he think his sins are so great that God would not forgive him if He remembered them? And how does "debt" differ from "mercy"? God's remembering sins in order to pardon them would seem to be as merciful as His simply forgetting them. The epigrammatic terseness of the couplet is, unless I am missing something, not substantiated by the meaning of the lines.



In my discussion of the first nine sonnets I have given a good deal of interpretive analysis. The purpose of this analysis has been to show by demonstration the value of the 1635 editor's and Grierson's ordering ordering of these sonnets. While Dame Helen's sequential ordering encourages us to find connections between sonnets in the same sequence, it discourages a close analysis of the differences between those sonnets. With the sonnets ordered as they are in Grierson's edition, in a loosely-tied group, we are in the best position to evaluate both similarities and differences. It is possible to see that in the matters of technique and theme the four 1635 sonnets have affinities with various 1633 sonnets, and that they are less similar to each other than Dame Helen's ordering suggests. Grierson's ordering also encourages, in a way Dame Helen's ordering does not, a close analysis of the argument of the individual poems. Rather than having to concentrate on one portion of the sonnet, and on how that portion relates to other sonnets, one is free to take each sonnet as an independent whole. As a result, it is in Grierson's ordering that the astonishing, if not always praiseworthy, play of Donne's mind is most apparent.

I have nowhere suggested that the editor of 1635 understood the sonnets as I understand them. Such a line of argument would be impossible to establish. It seems possible, however, that in compiling his text he recognized that the four unprinted sonnets were more appropriately grouped with the first five 1633 sonnets than with the last seven. While the first nine sonnets take up with differing emphasis the themes of sin, grace, and repentance, the last six sonnets





in the 1635 ordering are concerned with the theme of love. Furthermore, excepting Sonnet XIV, the last sonnets in 1635 possess an air of assurance (not, however, always convincingly assumed) that is missing in the first nine sonnets. Thus, the ordering of 1635 falls roughly into two halves distinguished by theme and tone.

Dame Helen and Grierson print Sonnets XI to XVI in the same order in their editions, but for different reasons. Dame Helen's argument is that the six sonnets can be divided into two groups of three, the second following from the first, and that these two groups take up different aspects of a single theme, love. The first three sonnets, she says, take up God's love for man, while the last three take up the love man owes to God and to his neighbour. Dame Helen is correct to say that the general theme of the sonnets is love. But, as noted in Chapter II, her division overlooks certain important similarities in five of the sonnets, as well as the singularity of Sonnet XIV. Furthermore, while Donne writes of God's love for man in each sonnet, he deals with this general theme, as in the first nine sonnets, in surprisingly diverse ways. Grierson's ordering, as well as allowing us to note the thematic similarity of the sonnets, also allows us to give due attention to the variety of techniques in the sonnets, and to the relative success of each sonnet. I shall discuss Sonnets XI, XIII, and XIV in some detail to demonstrate this variety.

First, however, we ought to examine Sonnet X, which gives us most obviously the air of assurance found in the last sonnets. In the first quatrain Donne lays out a paradox:





Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
 Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,  
 For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,  
 Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me;  
 (X, 1-4)

The paradox itself is commonplace. What is notable is the tone of belligerent confidence in which it is couched. The flat denial in the second half of line two, the ironic "whom thou think'st," and the belittling "poor death" are mainly responsible for creating this tone. Carried through the next eight lines, it lends an air of bravado to five rather unconvincing arguments for death's lack of might and dreadfulness:

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
 Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,  
 And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
 Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.  
 Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
 And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,  
 And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,  
 And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?  
 (X, 5-12)

The first argument is that if sleep, the picture of death, is pleasurable, then death must be even more pleasurable. Why must it? Donne seems sure enough about his conclusion, but the reader may well answer with Hamlet that "What dreams may come / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, / Must give us pause...."<sup>16</sup> Donne's second point is that the good die young. It is difficult to see how this makes death less mighty and dreadful, unless we are meant to think that the best men prefer to die young. With regard to Donne's third point--that death is a slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men--A.L. French makes the pertinent observation: "That death is a 'slave' to



all these isn't very reassuring: after all, the action of a thumb-screw is no less painful for its not being able to screw itself up."<sup>17</sup> Neither is it particularly reassuring to hear that death dwells with poison, war, and sickness, no matter how badly it may reflect on his character. The fifth point made against death, which, as most commentators note, is that the sleep of soporifics is longer and heavier than death's, leads into the final couplet where Donne solves the paradox of the first quatrain:

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.  
(X, 13-14)

The structure of the argument is thus determined by the sonnet form. If Donne merely laid out his paradox and then explained it, he would have a perfectly coherent six-line poem:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,  
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,  
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me;  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.  
(X, 1-4, 13-14)

As for the middle eight lines, it is a matter of indifference whether there are three, five, or ten points made against death. They are there to fill out the required number of lines. William Drummond recounts that Jonson "cursed Petrarch for redacting verses to sonnets, which he said were alike that tyrant's bed, where some who were too short were racked, others too long cut short."<sup>18</sup> Donne's argument appears to have been racked.





The sonnet illustrates a problem that Donne must also confront in Sonnets XI to XIII and XV to XVII: how to write confidently of religious matters without sounding overly pietistic or simple-minded. In Sonnet X he does not adequately solve the problem. His confident defiance of death depends on too simple a conception of experience, and is neither intellectually nor emotionally convincing. Again, in Sonnets XI and XII the theme, God's wondrous love for man, encourages an indulgence in self-abasement from which Donne is not wholly free. Each sonnet begins with a section in which man is denigrated. In Sonnet XI Donne compares his own sins with the sin committed by the Jews in crucifying Christ. In Sonnet XII he compares man's weakened and corrupted state with the rest of created nature. Both passages are intended to underscore the wondrousness of God's love, which is described in the sestet of each sonnet. Since the sonnets are similar in conception, it is not necessary to discuss both in detail. There are two points to note, however, about Sonnet XI, the more complex of the two. The first concerns the meditative influence on the sonnet as Dame Helen and Louis Martz have described it, while the second concerns the argument of lines 5-8.

The octave of Sonnet XI is regarded by some critics as a passage of vivid realism. But it ought to be pointed out that Donne's dramatic immediacy is here neither so dramatic nor so immediate as has been argued:

Spit in my face ye Jews, and pierce my side,  
 Buffet, and scoff, scourge, and crucify me,  
 For I have sinned, and sinned, and only he,  
 Who could do no iniquity, hath died:



But by my death can not be satisfied  
 My sins, which pass the Jews' impiety:  
 They killed once an inglorious man, but I  
 Crucify him daily, being now glorified.  
 Oh let me then, his strange love still admire:  
 Kings pardon, but he bore our punishment.  
 And Jacob came clothed in vile harsh attire  
 But to supplant, and with gainful intent:  
 God clothed himself in vile man's flesh, that so  
 He might be weak enough to suffer woe.

(XI, 1-14)

Dame Helen writes that this sonnet "recalls the colloquy with which  
 St. Ignatius concludes the first exercise, on sins: 'Imagining Christ  
 our Lord present before me on the Cross...' (p. liii). Louis Martz  
 quotes a longer passage from the Jesuit Luis de la Puente:

Then I am to set before mine eyes Christ Jesus crucified,  
 beholding his heade crowned with thornes; his face spit  
 upon; his eyes obscured; his armes disioincted; his tongue  
 distasted with gall, and vineger; his handes, and feete  
 peerced with nailes; his backe, and shoulders torne with  
 whippes; and his side opened with a lance:<sup>19</sup>

and he writes that "Similarly, in Donne's sonnet, the speaker has  
 made himself vividly present at the scene, so dramatically conscious  
 of his sins that he cries out to Christ's persecutors...."<sup>20</sup>

The first thing to note is how lacking in vividness Donne's lines  
 are in comparison with the passage from Puente. The second thing to  
 note is that it is nowhere made apparent in Donne's lines that he is  
 imagining himself to be present at the Crucifixion. Puente gives us  
 a point by point description of Christ on the cross; Donne addresses  
 the Jews in two lines with six imperatives, four of them--buffet,  
 scoff, scourge, and crucify--generalized, and asks that these actions  
 be performed upon him. What has happened to Christ? In line four He  
 is already dead, and in line seven the Crucifixion is an event that





happened "once," that is, in the past. Could Donne be addressing all Jews and not just those present at the Crucifixion of Christ? Lines 3-6 distantly resemble a later section of the same passage from Puente quoted by Martz: "...I present myselfe before thy Majestie, grieved that my grievous sinnes have been the cause of thy terrible paines. Upon mee, O Lord, these chastizements had been iustlie employed, for I am hee that sinned, and not upon thee that never sinnedst."<sup>21</sup> But Puente nowhere asks to be crucified; he says, rather, that the chastisements given to Christ would have been justly employed had they been exercised on him. It takes Donne eight lines out of fourteen to say what is implicit in Puente--that his own death would be insufficient reparation for his sins--and nowhere in those lines does he give anything but the most general indication that he realizes what sort of physical sensations accompany being nailed to a cross. Whatever vivid realities present themselves to our imagining come, not from Donne's lines, but from our own knowledge, derived from other sources, of what crucifixion involves.

Donne's argument in lines 7-8 for the enormity of his sin is curious. It is inaccurate to call Christ simply an "inglorious man" since, as French notes, if that is all He was, the Jews committed no impiety.<sup>22</sup> The point Donne seems to try unsuccessfully to make is that the Jews thought they were killing only an inglorious man. If this is what Donne is trying to say, then his argument is that men are guilty of sin according to the degree of intent involved in the act: the Jews were conscious only of killing a man; Donne consciously crucifies a God. The argument rests on a particularization of the general principle that Donne pretends to find unjust in lines 5-6 of





## Sonnet IX.

These are two more instances where Dame Helen's reading of the sonnet discourages close critical analysis. If the meditative influence is so much less noticeable than she says it is, and if Donne's argument, when elucidated, contradicts the argument of another sonnet, it will be much more difficult to argue for the sonnet's place in a meditative sequence.

Sonnet XIII is the most successful of the sonnets that deal with Christ's Atonement:

What if this present were the world's last night?  
 Mark in my heart, O soul, where thou dost dwell,  
 The picture of Christ crucified, and tell  
 Whether that countenance can thee affright,  
 Tears in his eyes quench the amazing light,  
 Blood fills his frowns, which from his pierced head fell,  
 And can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell,  
 Which prayed forgiveness for his foes' fierce spite?  
 No, no; but as in my idolatry  
 I said to all my profane mistresses,  
 Beauty, of pity, foulness only is  
 A sign of rigour: so I say to thee,  
 To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assigned,  
 This beauteous form assures a piteous mind.

(XIII, 1-14)

The first line advances a theoretical proposition setting up the situation in which the picture of Christ judged by man can be considered in its most relevant context--the situation in which Christ judges man. A.L. French accuses Donne of "taking refuge in a quasi-logic"<sup>23</sup> in the octave: "The fallacy, noted long ago by Empson (Seven Types, Chapter IV), is that a person who is being executed by slow torture is not really very beautiful; what is strange is that Donne has gone out of his way to emphasize the horror of the crucifixion."<sup>24</sup>



Of course lines 3-8 are meant to depict this horror, but they also clearly direct our appreciation toward those paradoxically beauteous aspects the poet specifies. The quenching of the amazing (that is, terrifying) light by tears, the smoothing over of fearful frowns with blood, and prayers for foes' forgiveness in the face of spite are evidence of divine beauty. The figure is attractive in so far as it makes possible our salvation. The lines achieve an extremely effective balance of terror and reverence.

It is odd that French also accuses Donne of glossing over important Christian paradoxes in the Holy Sonnets, Sonnet XIII in particular: "they continually reflect theological impasses without allowing themselves to be fully conscious of them as impasses."<sup>25</sup> He finds the labelling of the crucified Christ as "beauteous," a "piece of sophistry."<sup>26</sup> But surely Donne meets the paradox head on in the octave of Sonnet XIII and masters it: Christ crucified is horrifying, and Donne makes us see that vividly; but Christ crucified is also beautiful, and Donne makes us see that too.

In the sestet Donne elaborates on the paradox of the octave. Here, as Dame Helen notes, "Donne is addressing his soul, persuading it to be confident on the ground that the beauty of Christ is the guarantee of a compassionate mind" (p. 71). But the lines are problematic. Is Donne making a comparison or a distinction between what he said to his mistresses and what he says to his soul? Christ's beauty assures a piteous mind, whereas the beauty of Donne's mistress-es most certainly did not. Does Donne intend this distinction to be implicit in the lines? If so, then although he says to his soul the same thing that he said to his mistresses, he may be saying it for a





different purpose. The Petrarchan lover tells his mistress that outer beauty is a sign of pity in hopes of inspiring such pity in her; Donne at prayer tells his soul that Christ's beauty is a sign of pity in order to make clear to himself that Christ pities him. This interpretation requires that we read a great deal into the poem; but the alternative seems to be that, rather than implicitly making a distinction between the beauty of a mistress and the beauty of Christ, Donne sets up a comparison that is patently false. In any case, the difficulties of the sestet do not seriously affect the octave. The questions of the octave are rhetorical: their answers are implicit in the asking. The sestet seems designed only to lend support to a conclusion that is already established.

The critical debate over Sonnet XIV concerns itself almost wholly with the nature of the metaphor or metaphors that run through the sonnet.<sup>27</sup> Two differing interpretations of the poem identify the conceit in the first quatrain as, on the one hand, God a worker in metal and the poet a metal vessel, and on the other, God the deposed ruler of Donne the usurped town.

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for, you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
(XIV, 1-4)

Both conceits seem possible and neither conclusively right. Either might be objected to on the grounds that it fails to account for the whole quatrain. How can a metal vessel be said to "rise" and "stand"? How can it be overthrown? Though a deposed king may "knock" ineffectually at the door of a usurped town, it is difficult to see how



"breathe" and "shine" work in that context. I can accept neither reading wholeheartedly, but am unable conclusively to discredit either. The ruler-town conceit, of course, has the advantage of tying together at least the first eight lines of the sonnet.

What is perhaps most interesting, however, is not that both readings seem possible, but that the lines do not even demand to be read as a conceit. The language is metaphorical and highly suggestive, but Donne does not begin by explicitly indicating that he is formulating a conceit as he does in, say, "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning": "If they be two, they are two so / As stiff twin compasses are two, / Thy soul, the fixed foot..." (ll. 25-27). The debate needs to be carried one step farther back: is Donne formulating a realized conceit in lines 1-4, or is he using metaphorical language with such concentrated suggestiveness that the lines create a multiplicity of conflicting connotations over which he has no firm control? And if the second possibility is the case, as I think it is, then how can the lines, indeed, the poem, be said to cohere? We ought to consider the question in light of the remainder of the sonnet.

The first half of line five does explicitly introduce a conceit, which takes up at least the second quatrain:

I, like an usurped town, to another due,  
Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end,  
Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue,

(XIV, 5-8)

The conceit is clear: Donne is the town, reason the viceroy, God the ruler, and Satan, as in Sonnet II, the usurper. Donne is being usurp-





ed on by Satan, and reason, which God had placed in man to govern his actions according to God's dictates, is either ineffectual in its opposition to Satan's will or wholly won over to the side of evil. In the sestet, however, this conceit is either dropped or developed in an extremely strange fashion:

Yet dearly 'I love you, and would be loved fain,  
But am betrothed unto your enemy,  
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

(XIV, 9-14)

The sestet resembles the first quatrain in its use of evocative, but vague, metaphorical language. But there are problems. "Yet" means "despite this." But does it refer back to the previous eight lines or to the second quatrain only? Or does it not refer back to anything in particular? French's objection that a betrothal "as normally understood, is a voluntary act,"<sup>28</sup> is invalid since betrothal is not always understood as a voluntary act, but is understood more commonly as something that is arranged by one's parents or guardian. But this raises an even more serious question that Donne could hardly have intended. Who has betrothed Donne to his enemy? His Father? The couplet is also troubling. The paradox expanded can be read in this way: except you enthrall me I never shall be free of the devil, nor ever pure except you ravish me. The denotative meaning of "chaste" is "morally pure," and of "ravish" is "seize and carry off." But the close association of "betrothed," "Divorce," "Take me to you," and "enthrall" with "chaste" and "ravish," and the interanimation of





the two words themselves combine to produce connotations of "sexually pure" and "sexually violate," connotations that are as forcefully apparent as the denotation of the lines. But what do these connotations mean? Donne cannot possibly desire God sexually. How can a human being's union with God be compared in this way to the physical union between a man and woman without being debased?

How, then, does the poem cohere? I do not propose to weigh the merits of the various critics' arguments concerning this question. I shall merely quote a portion of one of the more sensible answers, that given by J.C. Levenson. Levenson begins by answering an objection that no good poet would develop a metal-working conceit, a military conceit, and a sexual conceit in the space of a sonnet:

This is, of course, precisely what Donne did, apparently satisfied that the unified theme, the common denominator of violence, and the specific verbal linkages established a sufficient connection among his three conceits. The word "o'erthrow" in line 3 makes it seem to have been less of a jump when we have shifted from the artisan's workshop to the beleaguered town....<sup>29</sup>

Levenson offers two more examples of "specific verbal linkages"--"weak and untrue" and "enemy"--but he has already undermined his argument with the word "seem." It may seem to have been less of a jump, but it is not. If we are going to delude ourselves in that way, we might as well give up reading poetry. Levenson's other two connections, however, are very helpful. The theme is unified, or to be more precise, the themes of the three sections of the poem are identical. The theme is Donne's desire for God to love him. And the theme is developed through the common denominator of violence, which intensifies as



the poem progresses and which reaches its highest point in the paradox of the last line. But the sonnet is far from a complete success. The uncontrolled associations of the first four and last six lines are confusing and, in fact, can only preclude a full intellectual and emotional response to the poem. The denotation of the poem rests almost wholly on bland assertion--"I...labour to admit you," "Yet dearly 'I love you." Moreover, while the poem progresses qualitatively through increasing degrees of violence, it superficially gives the impression of a rational progression. Such an impression is due in part to Levenson's "specific verbal linkages." But the most confusing transition is from octave to sestet. "Yet" gives the impression that the argument is being advanced, but I cannot see that it is. Lines 9-10 essentially repeat lines 5-6. The word "yet" creates a false sense of continuity.

The close analysis encouraged by an ordering in which each sonnet functions as a separate ejaculation reveals singular difficulties with different Holy Sonnets, but it also allows us to see that, even in the six sonnets on love, Donne's methods are surprisingly diverse, and in at least one sonnet, Sonnet XIII, extraordinarily apt. The ordering of 1635, then, is one in which the sonnets are appropriately grouped according to theme and tone, and yet not congealed in a pattern that encourages superficial readings of the sonnets or obscures their individual merits or shortcomings. By retaining the ordering of 1635 and adding the three Westmoreland sonnets at the end, Grierson gives us the ordering that is most conducive to a critical reading of the sonnets.





Dame Helen is probably correct in her conjecture that the last three sonnets were composed at a later date than the other sixteen. It is generally agreed that Sonnet XVII was written after the death of Donne's wife in 1617, and the preservation of the three sonnets in a single manuscript, the Westmoreland manuscript, allows the other two to be tentatively dated by association. Yet they need not for this reason be isolated from the first sixteen. As part of a loosely tied group, Sonnets XVII and XIX, because of the relative control exercised over tone and expression, are valuable as contrasts to the excesses of earlier sonnets such as the fifth or the tenth, while Sonnet XVIII may, in fact, not be entirely free of such excesses.

In Sonnet XVII Donne tempers the confidently pietistic tone of Sonnets XV and XVI. The subject is still the love between God and man, but it is handled with an air of resignation that derives from a recognition of the earthly trials that this love entails. Resignation, however, does not entail cynicism.

Since she whom I loved hath paid her last debt  
 To nature, and to hers, and my good is dead,  
 And her soul early into heaven ravished,  
 Wholly in heavenly things my mind is set.  
 Here the admiring her my mind did whet  
 To seek thee God; so streams do show the head,  
 But though I have found thee, and thou my thirst hast fed,  
 A holy thirsty dropsy melts me yet.  
 But why should I beg more love, when as thou  
 Dost woo my soul for hers; offering all thine:  
 And dost not only fear lest I allow  
 My love to saints and angels, things divine,  
 But in thy tender jealousy dost doubt  
 Lest the world, flesh, yea Devil put thee out.

(XVII, 1-14)

The difference in tone between this and the earlier sonnets can be clarified by examining two readings of lines 9-10. The punctuation



of the lines as they are shown above is that of the Westmoreland manuscript: a comma after "love" in line nine, a semi-colon after "hers" and a colon at the end of line ten. Dame Helen can make no sense of the lines as they stand and so repunctuates line ten to read "Dost wooe my soule, for hers offring all thine."

As the line stands in W, I can give no sense to 'for'. Repunctuation gives not the meaningless antithesis between 'my soule' and 'hers', but a proper antithesis between 'hers' and 'thine': 'How can I ask for more love, when Thou art my wooer, who in place of her love offers me all thine.'

(p. 79)

This reading, however, seems to place God in the rather unfortunate position of a "second choice" rival whose love is entertained only after the death of the first choice. This would raise doubts about the selflessness of the poet's motives for loving God. But there is no antithesis between "my soul" and "hers" to begin with. I agree with A.J. Smith that "for" means "on behalf of" (p. 635). The poet's love for his wife and his love for God have never conflicted. The first quatrain makes the point that, whereas the objects of the poet's love used to be one earthly and the other heavenly, now the objects are both heavenly. The next line and a half state clearly that his love for his living wife whetted, rather than conflicted with, his love for God. Donne still loves his wife, and hopes to be reunited with her in heaven. God encourages this hope in the poet by offering His love as well. This does not mean that the poet in heaven will divide his love between his wife's soul and God; rather that, if anything, Donne and his wife will be united in heaven in their love of God.

In the last four lines, however, we have a subtle shift in tone.





It becomes apparent when we ask how it is that God can "doubt." The answer, of course, is that He does not doubt; that is merely the explanation that Donne offers, rather whimsically, to account for, among other worldly trials, the early loss of his wife. Donne accounts for the hardships of his life in the same way that Herbert, in "The Pulley," accounts for the hardships of all men's lives--by surmising that God allows them in order that man may be more easily drawn to Him: "If goodness lead him not, yet wearinesse / May tosse him to my breast."<sup>30</sup>

I shall not discuss Sonnet XVIII in its entirety. The first ten lines have been heavily annotated by Dame Helen and Smith, and the former, in a seven-page appendix on the sonnet (pp. 121-127), offers an excellent paraphrase of these lines. As with many passages that receive several times their own length in gloss, this one is quite boring. The parallel passage in Satire III (ll. 43-69) is wittier, more serious, and much more pleasurable to read.

The passage that needs to be discussed is the final four lines, which both editors seem determined to misread:

Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sights,  
And let mine amorous soul court thy mild dove,  
Who is most true, and pleasing to thee, then  
When she' is embraced and open to most men.

(XVIII, 11-14)

Dame Helen paraphrases the lines thus:

Lord, do not thus hide thy Bride from our sight, but let me  
woo the gentle spouse of thy marriage song, who is most  
faithful to thy will and most pleasing to thee, when the  
greatest number of men seek and receive her embraces.  
(p. 127)





A few pages earlier she offers this alternative:

He prays that we may see the Spouse of Christ appear to men,  
as a wife who delights to welcome all her husband's friends,  
and whose husband, unlike earthly husbands, delights in her  
approachability.

(p. 122)

And Smith glosses the last half of line fourteen as follows: "open to the generality of mankind (with a glance at the paradoxical sense 'available to the largest number of males')" (p. 637).

It is difficult to decide whether both annotators are merely being polite. The word "open" certainly denotes "approachability" and "availability." But what are its connotations? What meaning does Donne's metaphor give to it? When a female is embraced by an amorous male, she is open, to quote Donne, "As liberally, as to a midwife" (Elegy 19, l. 44). And a woman who opens herself to many men as liberally as to a midwife is a whore. We may ignore the connotations if we so wish, but we will then no longer be reading the poem, and the connotations will still be there.

The lines are similar to the final lines of Sonnet XIV in their attempt to use aspects of carnal love to describe divine love. The problems in both sonnets derive from the nature of the theme. How can we understand the love of God when that love is infinite and, therefore, beyond understanding? It is, of course, possible to speak of the love of God, and Donne shows in the octave of Sonnet XIII one of the ways in which the theme can be dealt with successfully. But divine love cannot be illuminated by treating it as Donne does in Sonnets XIV and XVIII; such comparisons with physical love as Donne offers in these sonnets can only serve to debase and vulgarize it.



My implicit point throughout this chapter has been that to say the sonnets are separate ejaculations is not to say that they are nineteen unrelated poems. The similarities of theme and technique between different sonnets are manifold, and the fact that each sonnet is a complete utterance in itself need not prevent us from noting these similarities. Dame Helen's arguments are the most extensive and most intelligent effort to determine Donne's intentions with regard to the ordering of the Holy Sonnets, but, ultimately, they fail in the attempt, though they often shed a good deal of light on the individual sonnets. The best alternative ordering, then, is the ordering that most fully illuminates each sonnet by making clear the extent of its relationship with other sonnets, while at the same time allowing each sonnet to be judged on the basis of its own merits. That ordering is Grierson's.

Grierson's ordering, as I have said, encourages critical scrutiny of the individual sonnets. Such scrutiny is desirable, for the Holy Sonnets are, not surprisingly, uneven in quality, and our recognition of Donne's achievement depends on our making the proper critical distinctions. In all, there are five poems in which Donne is at, or close to his best--Sonnets I, VI, VII, and XIX in their entirety, and the octave of Sonnet XIII. That is close to the third part of the Holy Sonnets, and when we consider that Donne at his best is great, the achievement is more than sufficient justification for regarding him as one of our greatest religious poets. It is the distinctive power of the last of the Holy Sonnets that provides the final justification for Grierson's ordering. The sonnet is written in a plain style, achieved through generalization and the rhetorical paralleling





of grammatical units. Compared to the other Holy Sonnets, it is almost passionless. Donne seems to have moved outside of himself to a position where he is able to contemplate from a distance his devout fits and the inconstancy that gives rise to them. In the tranquillity that pervades the contemplation, Sonnet XIX is a fitting commentary on the previous eighteen sonnets:

Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one:  
 Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot  
 A constant habit; that when I would not  
 I change in vows, and in devotion.  
 As humorous is my contrition  
 As my profane love, and as soon forgot:  
 As riddlingly distempered, cold and hot,  
 As praying, as mute; as infinite, as none.  
 I durst not view heaven yesterday; and today  
 In prayers, and flattering speeches I court God:  
 Tomorrow I quake with true fear of his rod.  
 So my devout fits come and go away  
 Like a fantastic ague: save that here  
 Those are my best days, when I shake with fear.  
(XIX, 1-14)

Once again, Donne makes a comparison in order to make a distinction. Man is as subject to spiritual inconstancy, in divine as in profane love, as he is to the physical inconstancy that derives from an imbalance of the humours. And such inconstancy is fantastic--arbitrary or irrational--in its workings. Physically, man's best days are those in which he maintains a neutrality or balance of the humours; spiritually, however, his best days are spent, not in neutrality, but in fear. And, we may say, though such a state may sometimes result in what appears to be the overwrought verse of a feverish mind, it results at other times in the rendering of common, that is, communal, experience with the uncommon lucidity of genius.



## Notes

### Chapter I

<sup>1</sup> Herbert J.C. Grierson, ed., The Poems of John Donne, 2 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912); Helen Gardner, ed., John Donne: The Divine Poems (1952; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon, 1966). My discussion in this chapter is based largely on the textual introductions to these two editions. It should be noted, however, that my manuscript groupings serve the limited purpose of marking the different orderings of the Holy Sonnets. They do not correspond exactly to Grierson's or Dame Helen's groupings, where other textual matters are also considered. Further references to these works appear in the text.

<sup>2</sup> A.J. Smith, ed., John Donne: The Complete English Poems (1971; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). I quote from Smith because he has incorporated the best of both Dame Helen's and Grierson's editions into his text of the Holy Sonnets. Subsequent quotations from the Holy Sonnets are followed by sonnet and line numbers, from other of Donne's poems by line number.

<sup>3</sup> See Frank J. Warnke, ed., John Donne: Poetry and Prose (New York: Random House, 1967); and A.L. Clements, ed., John Donne's Poetry (New York: Norton, 1966).

### Chapter II

<sup>1</sup> Louis L. Martz, The Poetry of Meditation, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Dame Helen's reading of the sestet of "This is my play's last scene," and for an alternative interpretation, see my comments on the sonnet in Chapter III (pp. 43-48).

<sup>3</sup> A.L. French, "The Psychopathology of Donne's Holy Sonnets," Critical Review, 13(1970), 122.



<sup>4</sup> "To Sir Thomas Lucy," 9 Oct. [1607], in Edmund Gosse, The Life and Letters of John Donne (London: William Heinemann, 1899), I, 176-77.

### Chapter III

<sup>1</sup> A.L. Clements, John Donne's Poetry (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> Fulke Greville: Selected Poems, ed. Thom Gunn (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> The Fatal Mirror (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972), p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> Introduction to Saint Thomas Aquinas, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House Inc., 1948), p. 663.

<sup>5</sup> French, p. 116.

<sup>6</sup> V.iii.131-35, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, rev. ed., ed. Hardin Craig and David Bevington (Glenview Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1973), p. 336.

<sup>7</sup> III.iv.3-6, Craig, p. 606.

<sup>8</sup> II.i.294-95, Craig, p. 1258.

<sup>9</sup> Gunn, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> Yvor Winters, Forms of Discovery (Denver: Swallow, 1967), p. 75.

<sup>11</sup> Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems, ed. George Parfitt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 435.

<sup>12</sup> The Fatal Mirror, p. 133.

<sup>13</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> Martz, p. 43.





- 15 \_\_\_\_\_, p. 52.
- 16 Hamlet.III.i.66-68, Craig, p. 920.
- 17 French, p. 114.
- 18 Parfitt, p. 462.
- 19 Quoted in Martz, p. 49.
- 20 Martz, p. 50.
- 21 Quoted in Martz, p. 50.
- 22 French, p. 119.
- 23 \_\_\_\_\_, p. 112.
- 24 \_\_\_\_\_, p. 112.
- 25 \_\_\_\_\_, p. 123.
- 26 \_\_\_\_\_, p. 113.
- 27 See Clements, pp. 246-59. Clements collects six excerpts by five critics.
- 28 French, p. 122.
- 29 Quoted in Clements, p. 248.
- 30 The Works of George Herbert, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (1941; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), p. 160.



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